Mallarmé's Sunset

Poetry at the End of Time

Barnaby Norman



Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge

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For my wife Anna

Un astre, en vérité

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B.N., June 2014

Tout aujourd'hui, dans les idées comme dans les choses, dans la société comme dans l'individu, est à l'état de crépuscule. De quelle nature est ce crépuscule, de quoi sera-t-il suivi?

Victor Hugo

La littérature ici subit une exquise crise, fondamentale.

Stéphane Mallarmé

INTRODUCTION



Depuis Mallarmé

depuis Mallarmé (pour réduire celui-ci à un nom et ce nom à un repère), ce qui a tendu à rendre stériles de telles distinctions, c'est que à travers elles et plus importante qu'elles, s'est fait jour l'expérience de quelque chose qu'on a continué à appeler "littérature", mais avec un sérieux renouvelé et, de plus, entre guillemets.

[since Mallarmé (reducing the latter to a name and the name to a reference point), what has tended to make such distinctions sterile is that by way of them, and more important than they are, there has come to light the experience of something one continues to call, but with renewed seriousness, and moreover in quotation marks, 'literature'][1]

Maurice Blanchot[2]

La note à laquelle vous faites allusion rappelait aussi la nécessité de ces 'blancs', dont on sait, au moins depuis Mallarmé, qu'en tout texte ils 'assument l'importance'.

[The note to which you are referring also recalled the necessity of these 'whites', about which we know, at least since Mallarmé, that in any text they 'come to the fore']

Jacques Derrida[3]

'Depuis Mallarmé': the refrain rings out across twentieth-century French criticism. Mallarmé has fascinated the literary world for almost one hundred and fifty years now, beginning with the Mardistes –– his immediate acolytes from the Rue de Rome sessions — going by way of Valéry, to Sartre, Blanchot, Barthes, Derrida, Badiou, and Rancière, to name just the most obvious. He is the father of modernity with his extraordinary formal innovations, and a key reference of post-modernity. Literature changed with Mallarmé, and there is a sense that if we can understand what happened, if we can understand something of this *event*, then we can understand something of the opening of our own epoch. But, as the collection of names above indicates, he is not simply a poet's poet: in the second half of the twentieth century, Mallarmé became the philosopher's poet *par excellence*. His work seemed to point to a region of co-implication where the dialogue between philosophy and literature would become particularly involved. It is this region that we will be approaching in this study as we seek to establish what the 'event Mallarmé' meant for two of his most formidable readers: Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida.

In the quotation from *L'Entretien infini* given above, Blanchot sketches out a position that I would like to highlight by way of introduction. Firstly, we note,

Mallarmé is 'reduced' to a name and then to a reference point. This has to do with the broader argument of Blanchot's book, and the historic dimensions that his discourse takes on at this time. Further on in the passage, Blanchot will speak of this writing — for which Mallarmé's name becomes a convenient shorthand — as representing the 'end of history'. We need not concern ourselves with what exactly he means by this at this stage, this claim will be examined specifically as it relates to Mallarmé, and in detail, in Chapter 4. For now, it is enough to signal a displacement going beyond the sphere of poetics or aesthetics, and to recognise Mallarmé's implication in this: Mallarmé is placed at the very site of this transition, and so the question as to why this is the case imposes itself. In the second quotation above, we find Derrida likewise situating Mallarmé as a transitional writer and a little later, in *La Dissémination*, Derrida places Mallarmé at the end of the history opened by the 'decision' of Platonism.[4] We will find in Chapter 5 that what at first sight seems a fairly impenetrable allusion to the 'blancs' in Mallarmé's text, in fact indicates a profound displacement of the sign as a metaphysical construct. We will then be able to follow the similarly historical implications of Derrida's intervention.

It is because both Blanchot and Derrida position Mallarmé in comparable ways that it is possible and instructive to consider their readings in the same study. Ultimately they will use the same language to describe the end of the 'book' and the opening of the 'literary' in its radically modern sense — and it is Mallarmé's role in this that will be of interest. This is not to say, however, that Blanchot and Derrida give the *same* reading — each discourse is irreducibly singular, and this singularity will be respected as the context for the readings is reconstructed. But it is nevertheless for similar reasons, and with similar motivations, that they make such radical claims for their writer.

Secondary literature on Mallarmé is vast, and there would be little sense in attempting even a schematic overview. Suffice to say, it represents an extremely rich resource, and one on which this study has drawn deeply. One vein of research does, however, require particular reference, as it was largely on the basis of this work that the approach taken here was set up. Bertrand Marchal's *La Religion de Mallarmé* (1988) is an extensive study of the Solar Drama as it is operative across Mallarmé's text.[5] The book focuses unflinchingly on the motif of the sunset and it was this sustained interest that suggested it perhaps played a structural role in Mallarmé's poetics which would help to account for his transitional position in the writings of Blanchot and Derrida. Marchal's book suggested, therefore, a way of approaching anew these classics of Mallarmé scholarship, of resetting them in a context that would fully take into account the trajectory of Mallarmé's poetic development. If an interpretation of Mallarmé's sunset could be successfully drawn into the context of Blanchot's and Derrida's readings, then it would perhaps be possible to bring new clarification to what are complex and sometimes opaque engagements.

One other author should be mentioned in this connection: the sunset had already been isolated and interrogated in Gardner Davies's *Mallarmé et le drame solaire* (1959), although not so exhaustively.[6] Davies's work did, however, place emphasis on a Hegelian reading of Mallarmé (something that is more or less excluded by

Marchal), and this is important especially in the early stages of this study. Gaining an understanding of Mallarmé's Hegelianism is crucial to any understanding of his importance for Blanchot and Derrida who, as is well known, were both involved in ongoing interpretations of Hegel's writings. Since Mallarmé makes barely any reference to the philosopher and never comments directly on any specific works, this becomes a complex issue. It is discussed at length in Chapter 2.

The argument presented here is highly structured, and necessarily so. A certain order imposed itself on my research, with each chapter tending to build on the findings of the last. It will therefore be helpful to give an overview of how the argument runs through the sequence of chapters.

After Beauty

> Un ciel pâle, sur un monde qui finit de décrépitude, va peut-être partir avec les nuages: les lambeaux de la pourpre usée des couchants déteignent dans une rivière dormant à l'horizon submergé de rayons et d'eau. — Stéphane Mallarmé[7]
>
> [Over the world as it ends in decrepitude is a pale sky that may perhaps dissipate in clouds — streaks of used sunsets that bleed into the dormant waters of a river, submerged beneath rays and drops]

And so it begins. These are the first words of *Le Phénomène futur*, the first text in the first division of *Divagations*. Mallarmé paints a post-apocalyptic landscape and it is as though we are Clov, peering out of Beckett's *Fin de partie*. In a tent, beneath dusty trees, is a spectacle to be shown to the miserable crowd. Something has been preserved from the past: a woman. She is an extraordinary manifestation of beauty, but she provokes only incomprehension or sorrow amongst the masses, since she clearly does not belong in this time. Nevertheless, there are still poets, and they will feel 'their extinguished eyes reignite'. Inspired, they will return to work — but only because they have been able to forget that they are 'living in a time that has outlived beauty'.

What does it mean to have outlived beauty? How did it come to this? What, most importantly, does Mallarmé know about it? These are the questions that are on the horizon and orientate the path taken through Mallarmé's writings in this study. Starting in Chapter 2, this path will follow a rough chronology (rough because it will sometimes be necessary to jump forward or step back) through four key texts: *Hérodiade*, *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*, *Igitur*, and *Un coup de dés*.

Chapters 2 and 3 (*Hérodiade* and *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* respectively) give direct readings of the poems. These readings are undertaken in the context of the work of the first chapter where Hegel's *Aesthetics* will have brought us to the point of accomplishment at which, I argue, Mallarmé's poetics needs to be situated. In Chapter 2, *Hérodiade* is read as a poem of transition that quite literally narrates this status. Hérodiade's dialogue with her nursemaid provides a narrative of passage in which the poem will abandon a transcendent measure of value (which we will not hesitate to coordinate with God) to move toward the consecration of a poetics of pure interiority, in which beauty is in and for itself (or absolute). The second part of

the chapter draws on Mallarmé's correspondence to link this new conception to the poetic Absolute implied in Hegel's *Aesthetics*. Part 3 takes a first look at *Igitur*.

Chapter 3 provides a reading of the *Sonnet* as an attempt to achieve this pure poetics of interiority. As a perfectly reflexive work (purely narcissistic), the *Sonnet* must dispatch all reference to anything outside itself. This takes place through the agency of a global annihilation, or the 'pure crime' of the sunset evoked in the first quatrain. This is the central chapter of the book, and it is here that we will isolate an essential and irreducible ambiguity that forms the very heart of Mallarmé's poetics. The sunset emerges as a closing/opening mechanism that will operate the transition between the closure of absolute beauty (the 'livre') and the opening of its *beyond* (the 'text' or the 'literary'). As such it is the motif of crisis in Mallarmé's text.

Chapter 4 is principally concerned with Maurice Blanchot's reading of *Igitur*. In this chapter I argue that Blanchot's literary criticism is structured around an opposition. This first emerges in his discussion of the two 'slopes' of literature in his seminal essay 'Littérature et le droit à la mort', is carried through into his discourse on 'la nuit' and 'l'*autre* nuit' (*L'Espace littéraire*), before being taken up again in terms of 'le livre' and 'l'absence de livre' (*L'Entretien infini*). This chapter links this oppositional structure to Blanchot's reading of Mallarmé — it is made possible by the opening/closing mechanism isolated in the previous chapter. Mallarmé emerges therefore as an essential reference in Blanchot's criticism of the totalizing logic of the Hegelian dialectic, and as the site of passage beyond the Absolute.

The poem considered in the final chapter is *Un coup de dés*, or *the* poem of dissemination in Derrida's text. This chapter begins by examining the notion of the 'livre' in some of Derrida's earlier publications (*La Voix et le phénomène* and *De la grammatologie*) before going on to look at his readings of Mallarmé given in *La Dissémination*. We will see how Mallarmé's name figures a profound displacement of the metaphysics of presence. The third part of the chapter sets off from Derrida's reading to analyse three of Mallarmé's works (*Or*, *Un coup de dés*, and *Hamlet*).

The context for the whole is provided by Hegel. It is with the end of art in Hegel's *Aesthetics* that Mallarmé coordinates his project (Chapter 2, 2.3), and it is towards a beyond of the Hegelian system, towards a time that has outlived ('survit') beauty, that Mallarmé's work draws Blanchot and Derrida. We will need therefore to understand this end of art. The first chapter will follow Hegel through an illustrious history towards its problematic conclusion. We will be interested in the way in which his text authorizes a poetic Absolute as the apotheosis of its system only to override that authorization. Drawing out the reasons for this ambivalence, it will be possible to account for the extraordinary difficulties Mallarmé experienced as he sought to consecrate his new poetics. This in turn will set us on the path of the sunset, the divided heart of this study.

Notes to the Introduction

1. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. xi (hereafter referred to as *IC*). Translations are taken from standard editions listed in the bibliography. If there is none listed then the translation is my own. Indication is given when the translation provided differs from the standard edition.

2. Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. vi (hereafter referred to as *EI*).
3. Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Paris: Les Éditions de Galilée, 1972), p. 11. Interview with Henri Ronse given in 1967.
4. Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), hereafter referred to as *D*.
5. Bertrand Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1988).
6. Gardner Davies, *Mallarmé et le drame solaire* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1959).
7. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Igitur/Divagations/Un coup de dés*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).



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CHAPTER 1



Hegel: The End of Art

> Now, therefore, what the particular arts realise in individual works of art is according to the Concept of art, only the universal forms of the self-unfolding Idea of beauty. It is as the external actualisation of this Idea that the wide Pantheon of art is rising. Its architect and builder is the self-comprehending spirit of beauty, but to complete it will need the history of the world in its development through thousands of years.
>
> G. W. F. Hegel[1]

There are two good reasons for looking at the broad architecture of Hegel's *Aesthetics* at this stage. The first has to do with the way in which Mallarmé situates his project in relation to Hegel. The second has to do with the way in which Blanchot and Derrida situate their projects in relation to Hegel. These relations form, therefore, the context for the reading of Hegel's *Aesthetics* that I will give here. Broadly, I am interested in the way in which 'littérature', as it is re-inscribed in the work of Blanchot and Derrida, emerges as a contestation to the 'end of art' as it is encountered in Hegel's work, and the position that Mallarmé occupies in this context. Mallarmé's engagement with Hegel is a complex and contested matter, but I will show in Chapter 2 how, despite scant reference to the philosopher in his published works and correspondence, the poet in fact mimics Hegel's art-historical schema in his own reflections on the history of art, and how he inscribes his own project at the apotheosis of this process. It will then be a matter, in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, of showing how the system in its entirety is displaced through this encounter with the 'limit' implied by Mallarmé's poetics. The question we will ask of the *Aesthetics* is therefore twofold: what is the work of art for Hegel, and how can he declare the historical development of the artwork to have come to an end?

1. The *Aesthetics* as Art-History

At the beginning of the *Aesthetics*, Hegel defines his subject. Simply put, he is interested in beauty. His immediate concern in the introduction, therefore, is to specify what he means by beauty. He does this by delimiting artistic beauty from natural beauty, which he considers to be of a second order, derivative of the primary beauty discovered through the consideration of works of art. There is a 'qualitative' difference between natural beauty and the beauty of art, because only in art do we find spirit reflecting on itself.[2] Spirit, as the concretization of the concept in the world takes the path of a progression towards self-understanding

(self-consciousness), and the contemplation of beauty in nature is displaced from the self-relation implied by artistic activity. In art, spirit reflects on itself, and while the contemplation of beauty in nature may be informed by this self-comprehension, its object is too dispersed to become the locus of a rational investigation, and the beauty there discovered is imperfect and incomplete. So Hegel writes:

> spirit is alone the *true*, comprehending everything in itself, so that everything beautiful is truly beautiful only as sharing in this higher sphere generated by it. In this sense the beauty of nature appears only as a reflection of the beauty that belongs to spirit, as an imperfect incomplete mode [of beauty], a mode which in its *substance* is contained in the spirit itself. [...] In [discussing] natural beauty we feel ourselves too much in a vague sphere, without a *criterion*, and therefore such a classification would provide too little interest for us to undertake it. (*Aesthetics*, I, 2–3)[3]

The classification of beauty will therefore take the form of a classification of man's spiritual productions through which he expresses himself as a spiritual being. Because art is a manifestation of spirit as it reflects on itself, it is considered by Hegel to be one of the spheres of the Absolute through which man comes to an understanding of himself. In Hegel's system, therefore, it is placed alongside religion and philosophy, and the three together form the tripartite structure of absolute spirit.[4] The specificity of art, in contradistinction to religion and philosophy, is that it is the manifestation of spirit in sensuous form. We will see below how this form constitutes a hindrance for the artwork and ultimately leads Hegel to declare that it is a 'thing of the past'. But, before looking at how art, in poetry, encounters this curious limitation, I will look at Hegel's understanding of the 'content' which is manifested in art, at how this content develops in complexity through world history, and at how this development implies a hierarchical sequencing of the various art forms, leading from architecture to poetry (via sculpture, painting, and music).

The content of the artwork is engendered by the fact that man is a thinking being. By this, Hegel means that 'man draws out of himself and puts *before himself* what he is and whatever else is'. Man exists in the same way as things in nature, he simply *is*, but unlike natural beings he is 'just as much *for* himself'. It is this ability to be in relation with his own being which, for Hegel, distinguishes man as a spiritual being: 'he sees himself, represents himself to himself, thinks, and only on the strength of this active placing himself before himself is he spirit'. Man can express this self-relation through his practical activity. By his activity in the world, man is able to transform the external conditions in which he finds himself and to impress on his productions '[...] the seal of his inner being'.[5] This is what gives works of art their specific spiritual content. When the artwork is free and pure, an end in itself, it becomes a mirror capable of reflecting man's inner being. Artistic activity enables man to comprehend himself as spirit, and the content of the artwork is nothing other than man himself as he progresses towards self-knowing. This progress takes time, and this time is the time of history. How then does the content develop temporally, and how does Hegel relate this development to the various art forms?

Hegel understands the progression of history as the process through which spirit develops in its self-comprehension. In man, spirit achieves an ever deepening self-

understanding as it develops through its dialectical transformations. In the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, he provides the following account of this movement:

> The entirety of the development is a sequence of developments that returns into itself. Each development is a stage of spirit. The progression of development does not proceed into abstract infinity, but returns into itself. The entirety of the progression, the goal of this development, is none other than spirit's coming to itself, knowing itself (for then it is present to self), in that it has consciousness of itself, that it becomes object for itself [...]. The more highly it is developed, the deeper it is [...]. This very development is spirit's plumbing its own depth [...]. So the goal of spirit is for it to apprehend or grasp what it is, for it should no longer be concealed from itself, but know itself. The path to this goal, the series of developments, is to be grasped as *stages of its development*.[6]

The progress of spirit in the world is, therefore, the progress of an ever-deepening self-comprehension. When Hegel surveys the philosophical tradition he discovers there a dialectical movement through which thought deepens in its self-understanding as it discovers and surpasses the contradictions inherent at each stage of the movement. When all contradictions have been eliminated, a position that Hegel claims for his own philosophy, the process comes to an end with thought thinking itself in absolute knowledge (absolute self-presence). This is the end, the *telos*, of spirit's passage through the world. In the *Aesthetics*, Hegel's claim is that this deepening of self-comprehension is manifest in the works of art that man produces through the course of world history. The *Aesthetics* sets out, therefore, a systematic and totalizing art-history, in which the different art forms each come to the fore at different moments in the system as the most suitable means of expressing spirit's development at that stage.[7]

Broadly, says the *Aesthetics*, there are three major periods of art-history. They are the symbolic, the classical, and the romantic. The movement to the next period in each case implies a development in the complexity of the content of the artwork, but this deepening of the content does not always imply an increasing harmonization between form and content. In this regard, the classical stage represents a high point in the history of art which will never again be attained. In Hegel's schema the whole of the romantic period is a steady decline from the harmony of classical art. The reason for this seeming paradox is straightforward. In the classical stage there is a balance between the content of the work and the form in which it is manifested. At this stage of spiritual development, the sculptures of the Greeks are perfectly adequate to the content-seeking expression. Before and after the classical stage there is an imbalance between the content to be expressed and the means of expression. In the symbolic stage the content is inadequate to the form and in the romantic stage the form is inadequate to the content.

In the symbolic period, spirit is not yet sufficiently developed for its sensuous manifestation, and the period is characterized by a searching uncertainty which leads to defective works.[8] This stage is the threshold of art and it takes the form of a kind of ground-clearing exercise preparing the way for the adequate expression of the Idea. The architecture of the symbolic stage constructs the temple in which the sculpture of the classical period will be installed.[9]

In the classical period, there is a brief moment of harmony. In the sculpture of this period, spirit finds a form of expression which is in perfect balance with the content to be expressed. At this stage, spirit has not yet reached the point where it turns to an inner contemplation. Man has, however, become the proper object of his own consideration, and this explains the focus on the body in classical sculpture. Man has, to a degree, recognized his spiritual nature. He has understood that he must put himself forward as the object of his own contemplation, but the crucial break which will open him to his interiority has not yet taken place. In classical sculpture man represents himself to himself as an externality, and this is why there is a harmony between the art form and the content it is to express. The essential characteristic of art is, for Hegel, its sensuousness, the fact that it is a representation of spirit in externality. In classical times the necessity of the turn towards interiority has not yet been recognized, and so the limitation of the artwork, which maintains it in an irreducible relation with externality, does not become an issue. The break comes through the Christian revelation. Christianity disrupts the harmony of the classical ideal by initiating a turn towards interiority which becomes increasingly difficult to express in the sensuous form of art, and which leads to a consequent degradation of the artwork as it struggles to represent a content with which it is ultimately incompatible.

The restriction of the artwork, says Hegel, 'lies in the fact that art in general takes as its subject-matter the spirit (i.e. the *universal*, infinite and concrete in its nature) in a *sensuously* concrete form'. In romantic art, in contrast to the classical form, 'the *true* element for the realisation of this content is no longer the sensuous immediate existence of the spiritual in the bodily form of man, but instead the *inwardness of self-consciousness*' (*Aesthetics*, I, 80). Immediately after this comment Hegel underlines that it is Christianity that has introduced this new content.[10] As this content is not compatible with expression in exteriority it renders the romantic stage of art a curious movement which retreats as it advances.[11] The more highly developed the content, the less suitable the form of its expression becomes. Hegel therefore offers the following characterization: 'In this way romantic art is the self-transcendence of art but within its own sphere and in the form of art itself' (*Aesthetics*, I, 80).

The transition from the classical to the romantic stage takes place as a transition from sculpture to painting. This does not mean, of course, that no paintings were produced before the romantic period, or that no sculptures were made after the classical period. For Hegel, it simply means that painting is a more suitable means for bringing forward the higher content of romantic art. Painting is better able to express the interiority of the new content because it can evoke the inner life of its subjects through attention to the eye:

> If we compare the vocation of romantic art with the task of classical art, fulfilled in the most adequate way by Greek sculpture, the plastic shape of the gods does not express the movement and activity of the spirit which has retired into itself out of its corporeal reality and made its way to inner self-awareness [...]. This defect is shown externally in the fact that the expression of the soul in its simplicity, namely the light of the eye, is absent from the sculptures. The supreme works of beautiful sculpture are sightless, and their inner being does not look out of them as self-knowing inwardness in this spiritual concentration

> which the eye discloses. The light of the soul falls outside them and belongs to the spectator alone; when he looks at these shapes, soul cannot meet soul nor eye eye. But the God of romantic art appears all seeing, self-knowing, inwardly subjective, and disclosing his inner being to man's inner being. (*Aesthetics*, I, 520)[12]

But painting remains deficient because, however successful it may be in evoking the inner lives of its subjects, the form itself is spatial and can therefore have no true access to interiority.[13] The last two art forms in Hegel's hierarchy are distinct from the others because they imply a direct relation with the inner life of the one who contemplates them. Being essentially sonorous, music and poetry have the inner world as their proper realm. They break (to a degree) the dependence on sensuous externality and for this reason are key for Hegel as he seeks to describe the self-transcendence of art in its highest form.

2. Poetry and Interiority (The End of Art)

Music is situated by Hegel at the centre of the romantic stage. Music, he says, 'forms the centre of the romantic arts and makes the point of transition between the abstract spatial sensuousness of painting and the abstract spirituality of poetry' (*Aesthetics*, I, 88). Music is a crucial site of transition because in this art form we find the total 'obliteration' of 'the whole of space' (*Aesthetics*, II, 889). Being sonorous, music 'relinquishes the element of external form' and is perceived through the sense of hearing which 'is more ideal than sight' (*Aesthetics*, II, 890). Hearing is more ideal than sight in Hegel's schema because it is more appropriate to the evocation of the inner life, which is the ultimate goal of art once it has effected the transition to its romantic stage.[14] Music is the 'art of the soul and it is directly addressed to the soul' (*Aesthetics*, II, 891).

Although the transition to music marks a significant advance on painting, it does not have a supreme position in the hierarchy of the arts. The problem with music is that, while formally it implies access to the inner life, it cannot gain a proper purchase there because it cannot 'transcend the rather *abstract* inner life of feeling'. With music we have 'an undeveloped concentration of feeling', finding a 'purely symbolic expression in notes' (*Aesthetics*, II, 959). The meaning of music is bound to the notes it uses for its expression, and so, although it destroys the spatial sensuousness of the plastic arts, its content remains soldered to the sensuousness of the form. It is this link between the notes used and the meaning evoked which makes music a purely symbolic means of expression. Music is a kind of sound and fury signifying nothing, because its content is never independent from the medium of its expression.

It is in poetry that the spiritual content of the work finally begins to detach itself from the sensuous. Here is the essential difference between music and poetry: with the poetic utterance the sonorous element is the word. The difference between the word and the note is that with the word:

> sound, the last external material which poetry keeps, is in poetry no longer the feeling of sonority itself, but a *sign*, by itself void of significance, a sign of the idea which has become concrete in itself, and not merely of indefinite feeling and its nuances and gradations. (*Aesthetics*, I, 88)

In poetry, therefore, Hegel declares the essential independence of the word as sign from the meaning that the sign expresses; he declares the arbitrariness of the sign. This doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign is crucial as Hegel installs poetry in its peculiar position in his hierarchy of the arts.[15] Poetry is the art form where art transcends itself. This self-transcendence is, we have seen, the movement by which art overcomes its internal limit, its sensuousness. The content of the work must relinquish, therefore, any essential connection to the medium in which it is manifest. In poetry:

> this sensuous element [sound], which in music was still immediately one with inwardness, is here cut free from the content of consciousness, while spirit determines this content on its own account and in itself makes it into ideas. To express these it uses sound indeed, but only as a sign in itself without value or content. (*Aesthetics*, I, 89)

The content of the poetic work is considered by Hegel to be entirely independent of the medium of its expression: 'the spirit withdraws its content from the sounds as such and is manifested by words which do not entirely forsake the element of sound but sink to being a merely external sign of what is being communicated' (*Aesthetics*, II, 963). This decoupling of the content from the element of its expression means that at its limit the artwork is no longer an artwork:

> precisely at this highest stage, art now transcends itself, in that it forsakes the element of a reconciled embodiment of the spirit in sensuous form and passes over from the poetry of the imagination to the prose of thought. (*Aesthetics*, I, 89)

The steady decline of the artwork from its harmonious perfection in the classical period has been, therefore, the steady progress of its self-transcendence. For Hegel, the demand placed on art with the disruption to the classical ideal has implied from the beginning that eventually the content of the work would develop to a point where it could no longer submit to expression in a sensuous element. The broad sequence of the development he traces from sculpture to painting, from painting to music, and from music to poetry, is driven by the increasing conflict between the content and its formal expression. According to this schema, there must come a time when this trajectory is eventually exhausted, and despite an illustrious history, the highest truth of the Absolute is simply too advanced for expression in any sensuous medium. It is from the perspective of this exhaustion that Hegel reconstructs the history of art in his *Aesthetics*. It is because the artwork is thus incapable of further spiritual advance that Hegel famously declares in the introduction to this work that: 'art, considered in its highest vocation is and remains for us a thing of the past' (*Aesthetics*, I, 11).

Because there is no absolute need for a given content to be represented in art, the art of the modern period has no spiritual task. Hegel continues his analysis of artistic production beyond the point of this exhaustion, and notes that art in his day is freed from the restrictions, which meant that the content of a given stage is best presented in a given art form:

> The artist [...] stands above the specific consecrated forms and configurations and moves freely on his own account, independent of the subject-matter and

> mode of conception in which the holy and eternal was previously made visible to human apprehension. (*Aesthetics*, I, 11)

My interest in Hegel's analysis of the history of art is primarily directed by the way in which Mallarmé positions his poetic project in relation to this history. In the next chapter, I will argue that, in what may seem like an anachronistic move, he installs his work at the apotheosis of the Hegelian system.[16] For this reason, I will not follow Hegel through his discussion of art when it has no specific spiritual task to perform (a strikingly postmodern characterization).[17] Instead, I will finish this survey of Hegel's *Aesthetics* by focusing on the point of the highest ambiguity — the point at which the artwork oversteps its own limitation with the dissolution of the romantic stage in the poetic form.

Art, we have seen, has a limit. This limit consists in the fact that it is a sensuous manifestation of the absolute content. Through the history of romantic art, the formal transformations of the work (in its progression through the sequence of art forms), are determined by a development in which this limitation is progressively dissolved. The crucial break comes with music, where the spatial form of the plastic arts is destroyed and the form of the work itself enjoys a privileged access to the interiority of the subject. Music, however, remains in the realm of feelings, and it must give way to poetry where the content of the work maintains no essential bond with the words used to express it. Poetry, Hegel argues, is the art in which 'spirit [...] has become free in itself and [...] is not tied down for its realisation to external sensuous material' (*Aesthetics*, I, 89). Poetry is, therefore, in a unique and strange position. It is the art form in which art encounters a total dissolution of its internal limit. It is precisely at this highest stage that art 'forsakes the element of a reconciled embodiment of the spirit in sensuous form and passes over from the poetry of the imagination to the prose of thought' (*Aesthetics*, I, 89). Because Hegel maintains that the content of the poetic work is free from the sensuous material of its expression, he must allow poetry a mandate which is denied to the other art forms. With poetry, and in that form itself, there is the possibility that the artwork will overcome its limit, and become a pure expression of the inner life. If we follow Hegel to the letter, then we must admit that in poetry there is the possibility of a total resolution of art *in* art. There is the possibility, in short, of a poetic Absolute. Hegel admits this possibility, and he announces it as a risk:

> in this way poetry destroys the fusion of spiritual inwardness with external existence to an extent that begins to be incompatible with the original conception of art, with the result that poetry runs the risk of losing itself in a transition from the region of sense into that of the spirit. (*Aesthetics*, II, 968)

This is a risk because Hegel would like to claim the highest attainment of spirit for philosophy. He has been able to subordinate art to philosophy through his insistence on the 'restrictedness' of art.[18] Because the realm of philosophy is the realm of pure thought, it is unencumbered by a necessary link with an element external to itself; it does not suffer from the same restriction as art. But since poetry, like philosophy, uses signs, its mode of expression cannot be allowed to interfere with the pure content it expresses. If it did, then Hegel would have to admit that the pure thought of philosophy would also be contaminated by a necessary dependence

on an external element. So poetry is, like philosophy, de-restricted, and the sign is considered to be a perfectly transparent medium with no bearing on the spiritual content of the work.

In the *Aesthetics*, Hegel does not consider the poetic Absolute in terms of a concrete possibility. This is perhaps because, even as he indicates the way in which the limitation of art is dissolved in poetry, he still seeks to maintain that limit. This leads to a curious situation in which sometimes it seems as though art is destined to remain limited in its sensuousness, and sometimes it seems that art is destined to transcend that limit as it is dissolved in the poetic form. The limit is there and it is not. When Hegel discusses the dissolution of the limit, he makes it the condition for the passage of art *out of itself*. At this point art passes into religion and philosophy, the higher realms of the Absolute. But this passage is unclear. Why must art pass out of its own sphere into another which is foreign to it? If, as he writes, 'romantic art is the self-transcendence of art but within *its own sphere and in the form of art itself*', why is it that at the highest moment of romantic art, the self-transcendence is considered in terms of a movement to another sphere, passing over 'from the poetry of the imagination to the prose of thought'? If art transcends itself here by overcoming its inner limitation, then this self-transcendence does not necessarily lead us into religious or philosophical thought. The possibility is indicated that art will resolve itself within the sphere of art. This would be the true end of art, its final resolution in the poetic Absolute.[19]

This resolution is a possibility announced by Hegel's text. In the next chapter, I will argue that the 'synthèse' which Mallarmé proclaims in his correspondence in the period after writing *Hérodiade* coordinates with the self-transcendence of art within its own sphere that we have been considering here. It will then be a matter of seeing, in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, how the failure in achievement of this 'synthèse' displaces the Hegelian system in its entirety and how, out of this end of art, we come to consider a movement which Blanchot and Derrida will, in unique but related ways, name 'littérature'.

Before turning to Mallarmé's text, it is worth pausing here for a moment to consider the implications of the way in which the poetic Absolute is indicated as a possibility by Hegel's text. What would this poetics of pure interiority look like? To begin with, we could hazard that it would imply a content which was not represented through the process of signification. The content of the work would necessarily be an immediate presentation in which the moment of externality has been absolutely reduced (a complete dissolution/reduction of the sign). This passage to self-presentation would imply the annulment of the work itself as a work of art, because, as Hegel repeats through his analyses, the pure poetic work would have to free itself from the sensuous medium which has provided the very definition of the work of art. These two factors, the exclusion of externality and the annulment of the work, will, in the coming chapters, be seen to be precisely Mallarmé's concerns during the period of crisis following from his work on *Hérodiade*. We will encounter them in *Igitur* and the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*, as Mallarmé seeks to abolish chance and attempts to do so through a poetics of absolute self-presence, exemplified in the 'sonnet nul' (Chapter 3).

As a prolegomenon to the reading of Mallarmé's crisis texts, however, it will be necessary to retrace his path towards a poetics of pure interiority. This path is recounted in the narrative of the 'Scène' of *Hérodiade*, so it is to this text that I will turn first in order to consider how Mallarmé conceives his poetic Absolute as a purely self-reflexive work, folding all movement of referral back on itself in a supreme effort to abolish the contingency of externality.

Notes to Chapter 1

1. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* trans. by T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I, 90 (hereafter referred to as *Aesthetics*).
2. This subordination of natural beauty to artistic beauty is expressed clearly by Hegel when he writes: '[...] the work of art stands higher than any natural product which has not made this journey through the spirit. For example, owing to the feeling and insight whereby a landscape has been represented in a painting, this work of the spirit acquires a higher rank than the mere natural landscape. For everything spiritual is better than any product of nature. Besides, no natural being is able, as art is, to present the divine Ideal' (*Aesthetics*, I, 29).
3. Here and elsewhere, emphasis is the author's unless otherwise stated.
4. Not all art can be considered in this way. When art is frivolous or tied to particular ends such as ornamentation, it is not worthy of such analysis. But when it is free, and an end in itself, it can become the subject of a 'scientific' investigation: 'Now, in this its freedom alone is fine art truly art, and it only fulfils its supreme task when it has placed itself in the same sphere as religion and philosophy, and when it is simply one way of bringing to our minds and expressing the *Divine*, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit' (*Aesthetics*, I, 7).
5. This quotation and those preceding in this paragraph are from the introduction to the *Aesthetics*, p. 31.
6. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. by R.F. Brown and J.M. Stuart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 52.
7. 'before reaching the true Concept of its absolute essence, the spirit has to go through a course of stages, a series grounded in this Concept itself; and to this course of the content which the spirit gives to itself there corresponds a course, immediately connected therewith, of configuration of art, in the form of which the spirit, as artist, gives itself consciousness of itself' (*Aesthetics*, I, 72).
8. This uncertainty leads to a strange kind of artistic expression in which the idea 'exaggerates natural shapes and the phenomenon of reality itself into indefiniteness and extravagance; it staggers round in them, it bubbles and ferments in them, does violence to them, distorts and stretches them unnaturally, and tries to elevate their phenomenal appearance to the Idea by the diffuseness, immensity, and splendour of the formations employed. For the Idea is here still more or less indeterminate and unshapable' (Ibid., I, 76).
9. 'the fundamental type of the art of building is the *symbolic* form of art. For architecture is the first to open the way for the adequate actuality of the god, and in his service it slaves away with objective nature in order to work it free from the jungle of finitude and the monstrosity of chance. Thereby it levels a place for the god, forms his external environment, and builds for him a temple as the place for the inner composure of the spirit and its direction on its absolute objects' (Ibid., I, 84).
10. 'Now Christianity brings God before our imagination as spirit, not as an individual, particular spirit, but as absolute in spirit and in truth. For this reason it retreats from the sensuousness of imagination into spiritual inwardness and makes this, not the body, the medium and the existence of truth's content' (*Aesthetics*, I, 80). I insist on this observation here because it will be of significance when we come to look at Mallarmé's reflections on the history of art, and his position in this history, in the next chapter.
11. In a section entitled 'The Principle of Inner Subjectivity', Hegel provides a clear analysis of this new content, and explains why it is not suitable for expression in the plastic arts: 'at the stage of romantic art the spirit knows that its truth does not consist in its immersion in corporeality;

on the contrary, it only becomes sure of its truth by withdrawing from the external into its own intimacy with itself and positing external reality as an existence inadequate to itself. Even if, therefore this new content too comprises in itself the task of making itself *beautiful*, still beauty in the sense hitherto expounded remains for it something subordinate, and beauty becomes the *spiritual* beauty of the absolute inner life as inherently infinite spiritual subjectivity' (Ibid., I, 518).

12. The deficiency of Greek sculpture in relation to the eye is discussed at length between pp. 732–34 of vol. II: 'Therefore we can take it as incontestable that the iris and the glance expressive of the spirit is missing from the really classic and free statues and busts preserved to us from antiquity. For although the iris is often delineated in the eyeball or indicated by a conical depth and turn which expresses the brilliance of the iris and therefore a sort of glance, there still remains only the wholly external shape of the eye and not its animation, not a real glance, the glance of the inner soul'.
13. At the beginning of the section on music in vol. II of the *Aesthetics*, Hegel gives a useful summary of the path travelled up to this point. In the discussion of painting, he writes: 'however far painting develops to a more ideal liberation, i.e. to that pure appearance which is no longer tied to the figure as such but which has liberty to expatiate independently in its own element, in the play of appearance and reflection, in the enchantments of chiaroscuro, still this magic of colour is always of a spatial kind, and a pure appearance of *separated* things, which therefore *persists*' (p. 889). And then below: 'No matter how far we plunge ourselves in the subject-matter, in a situation, a character, the forms of a statue or picture, no matter how much we may admire such a work of art, may be taken out of ourselves by it, may be satisfied by it — it is all in vain: these works of art are and remain independently persistent objects and our relation to them can never go beyond a vision of them' (p. 891).
14. On this subject see Jacques Derrida, 'Le Puits et la pyramide: introduction à la sémiologie de Hegel', in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972), especially p. 107: 'si la vue est idéelle, *l'ouïe l'est encore davantage*. Elle relève la vue. Malgré l'idéalité de la lumière et du regard, les objets perçus par l'œil, par exemple les œuvres d'art plastique, persistent au-delà de la perception dans leur existence sensible, extérieure, têtue; ils résistent à l'*Aufhebung*, ne se laissent pas, en tant que tels, absolument relever par l'intériorité temporelle. Ils freinent le travail de la dialectique. C'est le cas des œuvres plastiques et ce sera aussi, on s'en doute, celui de l'écriture comme telle. Mais non plus de la musique et de la parole' [if sight is ideal, *hearing is even more so*. It sublates sight. Despite the ideality of light and the gaze, the objects perceived by the eye, plastic works of art for example, persist beyond perception in their external, stubborn, sensible existence: they are resistant to the *Aufhebung* and, as such, do not allow themselves to be absolutely sublated in temporal interiority. They put a break on the work of the dialectic. This is the case with plastic works, as it will be, we imagine, with writing as such].
15. For more on Hegel's doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign, see Derrida, 'Le Puits et la pyramide', pp. 97–101. The criticism of the reduction of the moment of signification in the history of metaphysics is a key element of Derrida's discourse at this stage. It is of particular importance in his readings of Saussure, Husserl, and Hegel. The voice has been privileged throughout the history of metaphysics because, in contrast to writing, it seems to bear a relation of absolute proximity with the subject, i.e. there is no passage through exteriority. This privilege can clearly be seen in Hegel's *Aesthetics* right here where poetry promises the dissolution of the sensuous form of the work. It is able to achieve this through a total dissociation of the content of the work from the means of its expression. In Chapter 5, I will return to Derrida's criticism of the exclusion of signification from the realm of pure meaning when I look at his reading of Husserl in *La Voix et le phénomène*.
16. 'Ce hasard nié à l'aide d'un anachronisme, un personnage, suprême incarnation de cette race, — qui sent en lui, grâce à l'absurde, l'existence de l'Absolu' [This chance denied with the help of an anachronism, a figure, supreme incarnation of this people, — who feels in himself, thanks to the absurd, the existence of the Absolute], Stéphane Mallarmé, *Igitur*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade Gallimard, 1945), p. 442 (hereafter referred to as *OC*). Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Mallarmé's *OC* will be to this edition. I have chosen to use the earlier version and not the updated two-volume

edition (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1998) as my main reference because the 1945 work was the one available to all of the principal commentators discussed in this book. In Chapters 3 and 4 I will signal important differences, bearing on the argument of this book, between the 1945 and later edition.

17. The point of the present study is to suggest a bifurcation at this point — two paths of postmodernity. One path sets off from a simple spiritual decrepitude: after beauty is characterized by an 'anything goes' relativism. The other re-experiences this end with Mallarmé and follows a movement of displacement which was strangely internal to the system: another figure of the beyond.

18. Along with the indications given above, see also *Aesthetics*, I, 102: 'But just as art has its 'before' in nature and the finite spheres of life, so too it has an 'after', i.e. a region which in turn transcends art's way of apprehending and representing the Absolute. For art still has a limit in itself and therefore passes over into higher forms of consciousness. This limitation determines, after all, the position which we are accustomed to assign to art in our contemporary life. For us art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself'.

19. On Mallarmé's attempt to overcome the Hegelian limitation, see Jacques Rancière, 'Musique, danse, poème: le circle de la "mimesis"', in *Mallarmé: la politique de la sirène* (Paris: Hachette, 1996): 'Elle [Mallarmé's thought] relève à sa manière le défi hégélien [...]. Elle revendique [...] pour le poème le pouvoir qu'Hegel lui a dénié: celui d'une pensée qui est identité immédiate de la pensée et de la forme, dans l'élément même de la pensée; celui d'un langage abstrait qui écrit en même temps, dans le tracé des signes, la puissance de pensée qui lui donne lieu. La poésie "proche l'Idée", dit Mallarmé' (p. 88) [This notion rises, in its own way to the Hegelian challenge [...]. It lays claim [...] to the power that Hegel denied the poem: that of a thinking which is the immediate identity of thought and form, in the element of thought itself; and that of an abstract language which simultaneously writes, in the traces of signs, the power of thought that gave rise to it. The poem 'nears the idea' says Mallarmé (Rancière, *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren*, trans. by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2011, p. 48)].

CHAPTER 2



Hérodiade and the Conception of the 'Œuvre pure'

Il n'y a que la Beauté; et elle n'a qu'une expression parfaite — la Poésie
[There is only Beauty; and it has but one perfect expression — Poetry]
Stéphane Mallarmé[1]

It would seem that Hérodiade is the last work of French poetry, the perilous point at which literature passes over into the unexpressed, and the European intellect faces suicide [...]. A decline of the West indeed! And one that goes far beyond the bounds of literature.
A. R. Chisholm[2]

1. *Hérodiade*

Mallarmé worked on *Hérodiade* early in his career and then again towards the end, never publishing more than the 'Scène' during his lifetime.[3] This reading focuses on the 'Scène', which, as well as being the only published section, is also the only part to be maintained in the later plan (*Les Noces d'Hérodiade, mystère*, the final version of the poem that Mallarmé was working on at the end of his life), and so provides the stable core of the work.[4]

There is a general consensus regarding the significance of *Hérodiade* for Mallarmé's mature poetics: it is a liminal work. In his *La Religion de Mallarmé* Marchal writes: '*Hérodiade* [...] est bien l'œuvre charnière de Mallarmé, celle à travers laquelle se touchent le rêve ancien et le rêve nouveau' [*Hérodiade*... is certainly Mallarmé's pivotal work, that across which the old dream touches the new].[5] If this is the case, then we should not be surprised to find this transitional status narrated by the work itself. The 'Scène' was the first part to be written and it has the feel of a preparatory rite. When I follow the narrative of the work in the reading below, I will be concerned to highlight the way in which the poem recounts Hérodiade's separation from her *vie de jeune fille* in preparation for an uncertain future. This story will, however, also be seen to describe the development of the reflexive structure of the poem itself, that is to say, the passage to maturity related by the poem will be seen to be the passage to maturity of the new poetics enacted by *Hérodiade*. This is an important aspect of the reading below — the narrative operates on two levels simultaneously. In the first place we are being told a story: that of a young girl's obsessive narcissism and passage to maturity. This level of narrative might be termed 'referential'. This does not mean that reference is being made to any given

reality (the story being told is a fiction), but that there is a reference beyond the narrative act. It is perfectly possible to read the poem and to remain on this level of the narrative. If we were to rest content with this reading, however, we would miss something important about the poem and it would be difficult to account for the work's crucial role in the poet's development — it would be difficult to account for the nature of the transition in terms of *poetics*.

Crucially, when we read *Hérodiade*, we are also being told something about *this* poem. The poem is constructed in such a way that the narrative also refers to the poem itself. This self-referential relation may be summed up in the seemingly tautological statement: Hérodiade's (the girl's) beauty is *Hérodiade's* (the poem's) beauty. That is, there is no character, fictional or flesh and blood, outside the context of the poem. In this sense, the poem can be said to be 'allegoric of itself'. Mallarmé's sonnet referred to as the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*, and which bears a close relationship to *Hérodiade*, will be examined in the next chapter. In this chapter, I will begin by asking how the particular concerns of *Hérodiade* produce this self-reflexivity as a key feature of Mallarmé's poetics.

1.1. Virginity (Purity)

In a letter to Villiers de l'Isle-Adam written from Tournon on New Year's Eve 1865, when work on *Hérodiade* was already well underway, Mallarmé gives an indication of the way in which this poem should be considered. 'En un mot', he writes 'le sujet de mon œuvre est la Beauté, et le sujet apparent n'est qu'un prétexte pour aller vers Elle' [In a word, the subject of my work is Beauty, and the apparent subject is nothing but a pretext by which to approach it] (*CLP*, p. 279). This is a statement about poetry in general, but it comes in a paragraph in which Mallarmé has been discussing *Hérodiade* (which would, in any case, be included under this rubric). We can, therefore, take this as a point of departure for an interpretation of the poem. Reading this poem we should not, Mallarmé says, be too detained by the subject matter of the episode being recounted, but should see it as incidental to the major theme, which is beauty itself.[6] With *Hérodiade* we are not faced with a poem which simply is beautiful or that is an ode to beauty. In either case the poem would be referred to a value transcendent to itself. With *Hérodiade*, Mallarmé is seeking to do something else. His quarry is beauty reflecting on itself, beauty in and for itself, a self-conscious or absolute beauty.[7]

It was in writing the 'Scène' that Mallarmé began to become aware of the magnitude of his task. So, although it was destined to be preceded in the sequence of sections by the 'Ouverture ancienne' and later by the 'Prélude' (which was to replace the 'Ouverture' in the later configuration), it offers a logical point of entry into the poem.[8]

Hérodiade is the name that Mallarmé uses for the biblical Salome. He is able in this way to conflate the cold-hearted Hérodias with her virginal daughter. The 'Scène' is written as a dialogue between Hérodiade and her nursemaid, the Nourrice. Choosing the Nourrice as Hérodiade's interlocutor, Mallarmé can set the 'Scène' in the private chambers of the young princess. Away from the court and in discussion with her most intimate servant Hérodiade can speak and act frankly.

At the beginning of the 'Scène' the Nourrice is alone in the apartment. According to the first conception of the poem as a whole she has just delivered her monologue or the *Incantation* which constitutes the 'Ouverture ancienne'. In the 'Ouverture' we learn that there is something strange about this day. Written after the 'Scene' we can take these words as a considered reflection on what is to take place:

De crépuscule, non, mais de rouge lever,
Lever du jour dernier qui vient tout achever,
Si triste se débat, que l'on ne sait plus l'heure
La rougeur de ce temps prophétique qui pleure (ll. 87–90)

[No sunset, but the red awakening
Of the last day concluding everything
Struggles so sadly that time disappears,
The redness of apocalypse, whose tears][9]

In an ambiguity which will be confirmed in the 'Prélude' of the later version, there is an initial confusion as to whether this sunrise is not in fact a sunset. Is something coming to an end or is something in the offing? It is difficult to say, and this heightens the mystery. It is morning on the last day: the beginning of the end, and it is this apocalyptic glow that will illuminate the 'Scène'.

The action begins immediately with the approach of the princess and the Nourrice requesting to kiss the ringed fingers of her mistress. We imagine that this request is accompanied by a gesture towards the princess because she is straight away rebuked: 'Reculez' [Forbear] (l. 3). This refusal is important as it indicates from the very start Hérodiade's desire to remain inviolate. It is echoed further on in the poem and in total the Nourrice is chastised three times for similar indiscretions. The second time comes in Hérodiade's dialogue beginning at l. 32, after the nursemaid has attempted to give perfumes to her mistress, and the third occasion begins at l. 53, after the Nourrice has attempted to touch the princess's hair. This first time Hérodiade explains her refusal to the Nourrice as follows: 'Ô femme, un baiser me tûrait' [A kiss would kill me woman] (l. 7). Such is her need to defend her purity that even a patently non-sexual kiss would 'kill' her. The princess has become aware of her own beauty and of a frightening responsibility to maintain it. In this first exchange she understands her beauty to be bound to her purity. Hérodiade continues and develops this thought in the next line: 'Si la beauté n'était la mort...' [If beauty were not death...] (l. 8). The demand of beauty is death. There is here a presentiment of the extraordinary difficulties that Mallarmé will encounter as he deepens his understanding of the project he is embarking on. These difficulties will be of major interest below as Mallarmé encounters 'le Néant' as the condition of absolute beauty.[10]

Hérodiade has spent the morning walking in the grounds. She wonders if the Nourrice has seen where she has been, amongst the old lions. This episode has the feel of a trial, as though she were proving to herself that she is unique: risking death to confirm her destiny:

[...] tu m'as vue, ô nourrice d'hiver,
Sous la lourde prison de pierres et de fer
Où de mes vieux lions traînent des siècles fauves

Entrer, et je marchais, fatale, les mains sauves,
Dans le parfum désert de ces anciens rois (ll. 11–15)

[You’ve seen me, nurse of winter,
In a massive stone and iron prison enter
Where the savage era to my lions clings:
In the desert perfume of those ancient kings,
I pondered doom, my hands inviolate]

I will explore further the significance of the lions when they are recalled below. At the end of this section of monologue Hérodiade sees that she has frightened the Nourrice with her talk and asks her to come and help her comb her hair in the mirror. The nursemaid now offers Hérodiade perfumes and this provokes the second rebuke:

Laisse là ces parfums! Ne sais-tu
Que je les hais, nourrice, et veux-tu que je sente
Leur ivresse noyer ma tête languissante?
Je veux que mes cheveux qui ne sont pas des fleurs
A répandre l’oubli des humaines douleurs,
Mais de l’or, à jamais vierge des aromates,
Dans leurs éclairs cruels et dans leurs pâleurs mates,
Observent la froideur stérile du métal,
Vous ayant reflétés, joyaux du mur natal,
Armes, vases, depuis ma solitaire enfance. (ll. 32–41)

[Away with those perfumes that do me harm
I hate them, nurse, and would you have me feel
Their drunken vapours make my senses reel?
I want my tresses, since they are not flowers
Pouring oblivion on human sorrows,
But gold, forever pure of aromatics
In their dull pallor or their cruel prismatics,
To keep the cold sterility of metal,
Reflecting the jewels of my walls ancestral,
The armoured halls of childhood’s sad domain]

As before when she tried to kiss Hérodiade’s hand, the gesture is dismissed sharply as an assault on the princess’s purity. Hérodiade is to the point, telling the Nourrice that she hates the intoxicating smells and that she wants her hair to remain ‘à jamais vierge des aromates’. It should be like gold, which is to say that is should remain untainted, ‘Observent la froideur stérile du métal’. With the dismissal of perfume and the adulation of cold metal, *Hérodiade* rejects the sensory world of contingency in favour of a more eternal value.[11] What is suggested here will be heightened to the extreme in later work when Mallarmé will seek to evacuate all contingency from his poetics.

The Nourrice now blames her age for making her forget Hérodiade’s rejection of perfumes: ‘Pardon! l’âge effaçait, reine, votre défense’ [Pardon! Age has effaced your prohibition, queen] (l. 42). Hérodiade, increasingly frustrated by her servant, interrupts her apology: ‘Assez! Tiens devant moi ce miroir’ [Enough! Hold this glass before me] (l. 44).

1.2. Vanity (Narcissism)

This marks a division in the poem and the introduction of a crucial aspect of Hérodiade's beauty. The dominant concern up until now has been Hérodiade's purity. The rest of the 'Scène' will take place in front of the mirror and the desire to remain pure will be allied with a self-reflexivity or self-consciousness. The mirror is an extremely important device in this poem, and it is worth spending a moment considering it as Mallarmé firmly installs it at this juncture of his text.[12]

Hérodiade, we know, is not a poem about the biblical Salome; it is not a poem that seeks to foreground the story of the beheading of John the Baptist or even to gain insight into the character of one of the protagonists of that story: 'je tiens à en faire un être purement rêvé et absolument indépendant de l'histoire', says Mallarmé. The subject of the poem is beauty and the apparent subject is simply a means of approaching this actual subject. *Hérodiade*'s subject is Hérodiade's beauty. But, since Hérodiade is 'un être purement rêvé' and does not refer to anyone (fictional or historical) outside the poem that bears her name she can be identified absolutely with that poem and we can change the last sentence to read: *Hérodiade*'s subject is *Hérodiade*'s beauty. The mirror is a mechanism with which *Hérodiade* can look into *herself*. So beyond being a narrative device, indicating the superficial narcissism of the princess, the mirror plays a structural role in Mallarmé's deeply narcissistic *Hérodiade*. The two levels of the narrative, the referential and the self-referential, begin to converge here. The mirror is the mechanism through which the movement of referral is turned back on itself and by which externality is excluded.

The next words of the poem are addressed to the mirror:

Ô miroir!
Eau froide par l'ennui dans ton cadre gelée
Que de fois et pendant les heures, désolée
Des songes et cherchant mes souvenirs qui sont
Comme des feuilles sous ta glace au trou profond,
Je m'apparus en toi comme une ombre lointaine,
Mais, horreur! des soirs, dans ta sévère fontaine;
J'ai de mon rêve épars connu la nudité! (ll. 44–51)

[Mirror, cold water frozen in your frame
Through ennui, how many times I came,
Desolate from dreams and seeking memories
Like leaves beneath your chill profundities,
A far-off shadow to appear in you:
But, horror! Some evenings in your austere pool,
I've glimpsed the Ideal in all its nakedness!][13]

Hérodiade's impatience with the Nourrice leads her to turn away from her servant and towards her own self reflected in the mirror. Addressing the mirror in this way may seem to indicate Hérodiade's narcissism, but it should be underlined again that she is not simply mesmerized by her superficial beauty; such an interpretation would remain on what I have been calling the referential level (referring outside of itself, towards a historical or fictional Hérodiade). Any reading of *Hérodiade* must

begin to accommodate itself to the poem's reflexive structure. By way of the mirror (element of the narrative *and* formal structuring device in the poem), the direction of the speech is turned.

For hours she sees little in the mirror but a distant shadow of herself, and memories separated from her like leaves trapped in ice. But sometimes, from this scattered dream ('rêve épars'), she is horrified to see herself as she is, in her nudity. We may consider this 'horror' as a reaction to the pure Narcissism of the work suddenly coming into sharp focus. On 20 April 1868 Mallarmé wrote to François Coppée:

> Pour moi voici deux ans que j'ai commis le péché de voir le Rêve dans sa nudité idéale [...]. Et maintenant, arrivé à la vision horrible d'une Œuvre pure, j'ai presque perdu la raison et le sens des paroles les plus familières. (*CLP*, p. 380)
>
> [It is now two years since I committed the sin of seeing the Dream in its ideal nudity... And now, having arrived at the vision of a pure Work, I have almost gone mad and lost the meaning of the most familiar words]

This letter is significant because it links the 'nudité' of self-consciousness discovered in the depths of the mirror with the 'Œuvre pure'. The 'Œuvre pure' would be a work in which beauty is absolute (and therefore perfectly reflexive), and not a work which simply is beautiful. Both in the poem and in the letter Mallarmé is horrified by this conception. Mallarmé's horrifying vision of an 'Œuvre pure', the vision of his 'Rêve' in its nudity, is a vision in which beauty is self-sufficient in the sense that it does not relate to any ideal situated beyond the work. This is perhaps why Mallarmé considers the vision to be a sin. According to a Platonic schema of beauty, what is beautiful is beautiful because it is close to the 'good' or the 'true'; it is this relation which gives it its value. Ultimately this is a theological schema because the 'good' is God. When beauty is no longer conceived according to this relation, this new conception implies a turning away from God. In breaking with the tradition in this radical way, Mallarmé is aware that he is articulating a poetics which commits a grave sin, it discovers the origin of value in itself and elides the theological necessity.[14]

After addressing herself/the mirror, Hérodiade asks her nursemaid: 'Nourrice, suis-je belle?' [Nurse, am I beautiful?] (l. 52); to which she replies: 'Un astre, en vérité | Mais cette tresse tombe' [A star, truly, | But this tress falls] (l. 52). This is the provocation for the third rebuke, and the Nourrice is told to:

> Arrête dans ton crime
> Qui refroidit mon sang vers sa source, et réprime
> Ce geste (ll. 53–55)
>
> [Stop in your crime
> Which chills my blood to its source, and restrain
> That gesture]

This time it is not only because of the risk to her purity that the Nourrice is told to stop. Hérodiade has after all asked her to help her comb her hair. The Nourrice has fundamentally misunderstood the question posed to her. She affirms that the princess is beautiful but she links this beauty with her physical appearance, suggesting

that the out of place hair needs to be put back in place; she mistakes *Hérodiade*'s profound beauty/narcissism for Hérodiade's superficial beauty/narcissism. There is a growing distance between the Nourrice and Hérodiade. Belonging, as she does, to the tradition which is being displaced, the Nourrice simply cannot understand the terrifying vision that Hérodiade has had of her own beauty. Her comment here serves to highlight this failure to grasp the stakes of the question that has been posed. This misunderstanding is aggravated in the coming exchange.

1.3. Solitude (Self-Presence)

When, in her next speech, the Nourrice says that her mistress is as beautiful as an immortal, Hérodiade breaks in: 'Mais n'allais-tu pas me toucher?' [Were you not going to touch me?] (l. 67). If I am an immortal what made you dream that you could touch me? This interjection refers back to the very beginning of the 'Scène': 'Ô femme, un baiser me tûrait'. Hérodiade emphasizes the difference between herself and the Nourrice by referring to her servant as 'femme'. There is an implication here that Hérodiade is somehow distinguished from the more human Nourrice. This elevated self-opinion has already been strongly evoked by the suggestion that the Nourrice's gestures are profanations or impieties. It is now that the Nourrice really begins to display her lack of understanding. She thinks that perhaps Hérodiade is preserving herself for the sake of some man. She tries to win Hérodiade's confidence: 'J'aimerais | Être à qui le destin réserve vos secrets' [I would like | To be the one to whom fate reserves your secrets] (l. 67). Hérodiade is dismissive: 'Oh! tais-toi!' [Oh! Be Silent!] (l. 68). But the nursemaid persists with her theme: 'Viendra-t-il parfois?' [Will he come?] (l. 69). This is just too much to bear and Hérodiade implores the pure stars not to listen. The Nourrice now has a genuine question which is heavy with consequence. Whom, then, are you preserving yourself for?

Et pour qui, dévorée
D'angoisses, gardez-vous la splendeur ignorée
Et le mystère vain de votre être? (ll. 73–75)

[And for whom,
Devoured by anguish, do you keep the unknown
Splendour and mystery of your being?]

Hérodiade's answer is simple but highly significant: 'Pour moi' [For me] (l. 75). These words further consolidate the convergence of the referential and self-referential levels of the narrative. Hérodiade checks the movement outside of the text, turning the direction of referral back onto herself (back, that is, onto *Hérodiade*). With this answer there is a palpable change of tone. The Nourrice, thinking that she has gained insight into the mental state of her protégée, begins to feel sorry for Hérodiade: 'Triste fleur qui croît seule' [Sad flower that grows all alone] (l. 76). And when Hérodiade tells her to keep her pity to herself, she replies that she will one day grow out of it. Note the change in the way she addresses her mistress who has fallen from the status of queen to naive child: 'oh! non, naïve enfant, | Décroitra, quelque jour, ce dédain triomphant' [oh! No, some day it will Wane, | You naive

child, this triumphant disdain] (ll. 79–80). Hérodiade now refers back to the proof that she has drawn from her walk among the lions. We begin to get a sense of the significance of this test for Hérodiade, and Mallarmé's reasons for including it in the poem.[15] Hérodiade needed to bolster her conviction that she was correct to believe in her destiny. Her solitary walk among the lions confirmed to her what she had suspected. While she was amongst them she took her time calmly stripping (a gradual revelation of her nudity — this is what causes her fright/horror) near a pool, and the lions remained placid-looking at her feet. We can imagine them in this posture with their heads bowed:

Mais encore as-tu vu quels furent mes effrois?
Je m'arrête rêvant aux exils, et j'effeuille,
Comme près d'un bassin dont le jet d'eau m'accueille,
Les pâles lys qui sont en moi, tandis qu'épris
De suivre du regard les languides débris
Descendre, à travers ma rêverie, en silence,
Les lions, de ma robe écartent l'indolence
Et regardent mes pieds qui calmeraient la mer. (ll. 16–23)

[But have you seen the things that caused my fright?
Dreaming of banishment, I stop and peel,
As if beside a fountain's welcoming pool,
Petals within myself of lilies pale:
The fascinated lions watch the pile
Of fragments floating through my reverie,
And gaze on feet that would have calmed the sea
When they have swept aside my indolent dress]

The lions, which have earlier been called 'anciens rois', bow their heads to look at the feet of the princess. So in her response to the Nourrice, when she now refers back to this proof, Hérodiade asks: 'Mais qui me toucherait, des lions respectée?' [But who would dare touch one the lions left alone?] (l. 81). Whatever happened, or did not happen, amongst the lions was extremely important for Hérodiade. The poem begins with her return from this episode and it provoked, as a direct consequence, her heightened sense of the need to remain pure. It was amongst them that she began to approach her 'nudity' and, at this stage in the poem, when the Nourrice is failing to take her seriously, the episode is recalled to reinforce her strength against the incredulity of her old servant. Hérodiade hardens in her resolve:

Du reste, je ne veux rien d'humain et, sculptée,
Si tu me vois les yeux perdus au paradis,
C'est quand je me souviens de ton lait bu jadis. (ll. 82–84)

[I want nothing human; and if, some day, a stone
Statue you find me with troubled eyes in paradise
It's when I remember the milk you once fed me]

Again, there is allusion to Hérodiade's notion of herself as an immortal, 'je ne veux rien d'humain', and she goes on to describe herself as 'sculptée', suggesting the gods of the ancient world. If ever she seems disturbed from this sculpted tranquillity, 'les yeux perdus', it will only be because she is thinking back to her

childhood when she was raised on all too human milk. For many commentators, the Nourrice here represents an earlier writing (‘méchant plumage’) which is being surpassed in Mallarmé’s new poetics (‘plumage héraldique’),[16] she supplied the milk on which Hérodiade was nourished, but she is also the heavy tradition from which Hérodiade must detach herself.[17] Even if she doesn’t believe in Hérodiade’s cause, at least the Nourrice now takes her seriously, or she knows that she is deadly serious about herself. The Nourrice’s next words are a kind of release for Hérodiade. The Nourrice resigns. In Hérodiade’s last words she had implied that she was now cut off from her past and her childhood nourished on the milk of her nursemaid. The Nourrice recognizes a definitive break and ungraciously hands Hérodiade over to her tragic destiny as a sacrificial victim: ‘Victime lamentable à son destin offerte!’ [Lamentable victim offered to her doom!] (l. 85). The tension that has built up over the previous exchanges snaps here. Hérodiade has succeeded in freeing herself from her past, a necessary prelude to her giving herself over to her future. This release is felt as a kind of rush in the first words of a long monologue: ‘Oui, c’est pour moi, pour moi, que je fleuris, déserte!’ [Yes, it’s for me, for me, that deserted I bloom!] (l. 86). Affirmation and repetition, Hérodiade returns to the language used earlier in this exchange — ‘pour moi’. On this side of the Nourrice’s release the ‘pour moi’ can no longer be taken as an adolescent affectation. Hérodiade has successfully broken with her childhood and in the space of a few lines of verse she has matured immeasurably. The recollection of the episode with the lions was the key to this break and Hérodiade launches into a long speech addressed partly to herself, reflected in the mirror, and partly to the Nourrice.

It is in the lines that begin the second section of her speech, perhaps the most important passage in the poem, that Hérodiade reconciles herself to the horror of her nudity: ‘J’aime l’horreur d’être vierge et je veux | Vivre parmi l’effroi’ [I love the horror of virginity, and I will | Live in dread] (ll. 103–04). We may see this as further acceptance of her destiny. This horror, we saw above, is discovered in the depths of the mirror. In a letter to Villiers de l’Isle-Adam dated 24 September 1867, the association of the mirror with a feeling of horror is again recalled: ‘Le miroir qui m’a réfléchi l’Être a été le plus souvent l’Horreur’ [The mirror which reflected Being to me was most often Horror] (*CLP*, p. 367).

Reaffirming in the poem the importance of the mirror as the mechanism of her self-reflection, Hérodiade, in this section of her speech, addresses herself, reflected in the mirror, in the second person as a sister towards whom she is ascending:

> Toi qui te meurs, toi qui brûles de chasteté,
> Nuit blanche de glaçons et de neige cruelle!
> Et ta sœur solitaire, ô ma sœur éternelle
> Mon rêve montera vers toi (ll. 108–11)
>
> [You who die, you who burn with chastity,
> White night of icicles and cruel snow!
> And your solitary sister, O mine forever now
> My dream shall rise towards you]

The mirror retains Hérodiade’s ideal reflection, her *self*, in her ‘nudité’. Hérodiade is seeking to join this ‘sister’ and her desire, her ‘rêve’, will rise towards her. The break

with the tradition, narrated as a break with the nursemaid, is therefore followed immediately by a resolved turn to interiority. The petulance that Hérodiade demonstrated earlier dissipates here. If the vision of the 'Œuvre pure' has evoked a feeling of horror, this will no longer stand in her way. Whatever the consequences of the new poetics, they must be assumed.

The confusion of persons is complete when in the closing lines of this monologue Hérodiade refers to herself in the first and third persons:

Je me crois seule en mon monotone patrie
Et tout, autour de moi, vit dans l'idolâtrie
D'un miroir qui reflète en son calme dormant
Hérodiade au clair regard de diamant... (ll. 113–16)

[I am alone in my monotonous country,
While all those around live in the idolatry
Of a mirror reflecting in its depths serene
Hérodiade, whose gaze is diamond keen...]

This multiple perspective is opened by the mirror which splits the person of Hérodiade, dividing her in herself and setting up the possibility of a return to her ideal self. This speculative return is, of course, a thoroughly Hegelian movement. Seizing herself in her nudity she will be conscious of her own beauty, or, to say the same thing, her beauty will be conscious of itself, or self-conscious. Her solitude is inescapable; who else could comprehend this beauty. From any other perspective Hérodiade could only be beautiful, she could not be absolute, self-conscious beauty. Hérodiade believes she is alone and looks at herself reflected 'au clair regard de diamant'. The diamond, with its implications of transparency, purity, and preciousness, conveys here the notion of a pure consciousness of self. And so the last line of this monologue: 'O charme dernier, oui! je le sens, je suis seule' [O final enchantement, yes! I sense it, I am alone] (l. 117). Over the course of this speech Hérodiade has gone from an understanding that she is saving her virginity for herself to a fuller comprehension of the reflexive, speculative aspect of the self-conscious beauty she desires. The whole of the mirror scene, from where she first asks the Nourrice to help her comb her hair, has been leading towards this realization. As at the beginning of this monologue (l. 86) the 'oui!' affirms her understanding of her task, marking the advance in her self-comprehension.

The Nourrice has gleaned little from Hérodiade's monologue. She is certainly politer and calmer than the last time she addressed her mistress, respectfully calling her 'Madame'. But she does not seem to have grasped much of the second part of Hérodiade's speech and is brooding on the final words addressed to her before Hérodiade turned her attentions to herself reflected in the mirror. She wants to know if is true that Hérodiade is going to die: 'Madame, allez-vous donc mourir?' [Will you die, then, Madam?] (l. 118). The break that took place before the monologue seems definitive. As Hérodiade responds to the nursemaid, gently dismissing her, she is sympathetic to her lack of understanding: 'Non, pauvre aïeule, | Sois calme et, t'éloignant, pardonne à ce cœur dur' [No, poor ancient one, | Be calm and, leaving, pardon this heard heart] (ll. 118–19). In a last flash of passion she asks the Nourrice to close the shutters before she leaves. The 'azur' is

anathema to Hérodiade. She requires solitude for the turn inward, and the 'azur' indicates the temptation of a beauty (referred to the transcendent) which she must now surpass:[18]

> Mais avant, si tu veux, clos les volets, l'azur
> Séraphique sourit dans les vitres profondes,
> Et je déteste, moi, le bel azur! (ll. 120–22)
>
> [But first, if you would, draw the shutters, the Seraphic
> Azure smiles in the deep windows,
> And I detest the radiant blue!]

In her final speech at the end of the poem Hérodiade bids farewell to her Nourrice and by the same token to her childhood. She awaits something unknown. In later workings of the poem this unknown thing can certainly be aligned with her mystical union with the decapitated head of John the Baptist, but as yet Hérodiade is ignorant of her future: 'J'attends une chose inconnue' [I await I know not what] (l. 130).

This reading has distinguished three aspects of *Hérodiade*'s beauty: virginity (purity), vanity (narcissism) and solitude (self-presence). Despite this strategy, it would be very difficult, however, to fully isolate any one of these aspects — they are all interrelated and I have tried to show how they are interwoven as different facets of the pure, self-reflexive beauty towards which Mallarmé is moving in this poem. The 'Scène' is in many regards preparatory. It is a kind of initiation, laying out the preconditions of the Absolute which will become an all-consuming concern for Mallarmé. This preparatory nature is reflected in the episodes of the narrative brought forward above. Firstly, there is the strange light which sets the mood for the 'Scène' at the end of the later 'Ouverture ancienne'. The red light ('rougeur') of the sunrise/sunset is portentous, indicating that something momentous is in the offing. Then there is the evocation of the walk amongst the lions which has the significance of a sign for Hérodiade, a proof drawn from the ancient kings that she has some kind of destined role. This proof heightens Hérodiade's sense that she must remain completely pure, even of the perfumes and touches of her old nursemaid. The argument with the Nourrice leads to one of the most significant moments of the 'Scène' where Hérodiade is delivered to her future.[19] This break with her Nourrice is also a break with her childhood and the young woman is ready. The one thing she knows, however, is that she is not keeping herself for any man. Her purity is for herself. She comes to a deeper understanding of this in front of the mirror where her person is split and she addresses her 'soeur éternelle', to whom she will ascend. Through all of this, the orientation of the action is towards an unknown future. At the end of the passage, Hérodiade dismisses the servant to remain alone in the shuttered room, awaiting 'une chose inconnue'.

It is likely, as L.J. Austin affirms in his 1959 essay 'Le "Cantique de saint Jean" de Stéphane Mallarmé', that at the time of composition of the 'Scène', Mallarmé himself was uncertain about what it was that Hérodiade awaited.[20] At the end of the 'Scène' we are poised, with the poet, on the threshold of a crisis. The poem has told the story of itself as a preparatory purification and in this narrative it narrates its own becoming as a reflexive work. As the poem progresses along this narrative, so it embodies an increasing self-confidence and self-comprehension. In front of

the mirror Hérodiade refuses any relation outside of herself, in the end having the shutters closed to block out the 'azure', an unpalatable beyond, and sending away the nursemaid so that she can be alone. It is this self-reference which places it right at the threshold of Mallarmé's transition to his mature poetics.

As he pushed on with the poem through 1866 and 1867, a period of extreme exaltation at the progress made on the 'Ouverture' (the work which followed immediately from the completion of the 'Scène') merges with a broader articulation of his conception of the 'Grande Œuvre'. This broader articulation, which can be reconstructed, to a degree, from references scattered throughout his correspondence, is written into the dense pages of *Igitur*, which, Dr Edmond Bonniot tells us in his preface, reproduced in the *Œuvres complètes*, were mostly composed from 1867–70. In the second part of this chapter, I will follow Mallarmé's developing comprehension of his poetic task as it is expressed in his correspondence, before taking a first look at the collection of notes published as *Igitur* in part 3.

2. Letters (The Great Ecstasy of Stéphane Mallarmé)

2.1. 1866 — Conception of the 'Œuvre'

By the end of 1865 Mallarmé had completed the 'Scène' and during the winter of 1865–66 he was hard at work on the 'Ouverture'. This was extremely arduous and when he wrote to Catulle Mendès (20 March 1866) in anticipation of a trip to visit Lefébure in Cannes (end of March, beginning of April, 1866), he speaks of a sterility which he hopes to overcome on his holiday: 'épuisé que je suis, usé de travail malheureux et sterile. Je compte sur une vraie résurrection, là-bas, au soleil pascal, parmi les lauriers méditerranéens' [exhausted as I am, worn by unfruitful and sterile labours. I'm banking on a true resurrection, there, under the pascal sun, amongst the Mediterranean laurels] (*CLP*, p. 287). This trip seems to have helped. The next time that *Hérodiade* is mentioned in his correspondence it is just over a month later in another letter to Mendès, and the poet's chronic concerns are moderated by a renewed confidence; the princess will become a queen, but when? 'Pourtant, elle sortira, la Reine! de toutes ces tristesses, — mais quand?' [And yet, she will emerge, the Queen! from all these pains — but when?] (*CLP*, p. 295, 24 April 1866). Just four days later, in a letter to Cazalis, Mallarmé is exuberant:

> J'ai donc à te raconter trois mois, à bien grands traits; c'est effrayant, cependant! je les ai passés, acharné sur Hérodiade, ma lampe le sait! J'ai écrit l'ouverture musicale, presqu'encore à l'état d'ébauche, mais je puis dire sans présomption qu'elle sera d'un effet inouï, et que la scène dramatique que tu connais n'est auprès de ces vers que ce qu'est une vulgaire image d'Epinal comparée à une toile de Léonard de Vinci. (*CLP*, p. 297, 28 April 1866)

> [So I have three months to tell you about, in very general terms; it's scary though! I spent them working relentlessly on Hérodiade, my lamp knows! I have written the musical overture, almost a sketch still, but I can say without presumption that it will be unlike anything that has come before, and that in comparison the dramatic scene that you know is like a vulgar cliché next to a canvas by Leonardo da Vinci]

The 'Ouverture', even in its unfinished state, already surpasses the 'Scène'. The significance of this letter, however, comes in what Mallarmé goes on to say. In this letter we can read the beginnings of an amplification of the importance of *Hérodiade* for the poet's project that was only intimated previously. Beyond the specific concerns of the poem, *Hérodiade* has led Mallarmé to decisive aesthetic discoveries. The poet is beginning to conceive of a larger work which will evolve through the years of the crisis to become the overarching obsession of his life. At this stage it is envisaged as a simple volume of lyric poems: 'Tel est le plan de mon volume Lyrique, et tel sera peut-être son titre, La Gloire du Mensonge, ou le Glorieux Mensonge. Je chanterai en désespéré' [Such is the plan of my Lyric volume, and such will perhaps be its title, The Glory of the Lie, or the Glorious Lie. I will sing in despair] (*CLP*, p. 297, 28 April 1866). Commenting on this letter, Marchal writes in *La Religion de Mallarmé:* 'Mallarmé [...] formule déjà tout un programme, comme si l'œuvre future tout entière était apparue d'un coup, sous la forme d'une évidence logique invincible' [Mallarmé is already projecting a complete programme, as though the entire future oeuvre had appeared at once, as a logical inevitability].[21]

Mallarmé goes on to inform Cazalis that as of 1 May he will leave *Hérodiade* in order to work on his *Faune*. *Hérodiade* is after all a winter poem. This is not to say, however, that the insights the work has brought the poet are also to be laid aside. Later on in the summer he writes to Cazalis again:

> En vérité, je voyage, mais dans des pays Inconnus, et si, pour fuir la réalité torride, je me plais à évoquer des images froides, je te dirai que je suis depuis un mois dans les plus purs glaciers de l'Esthétique — qu'après avoir trouvé le Néant, j'ai trouvé le Beau — et que tu ne peux t'imaginer dans quelles altitudes lucides je m'aventure. Il en sortira un cher poème auquel je travaille, et, cet hiver (ou un autre) Hérodiade, où je m'étais mis tout entier sans le savoir, d'où mes doutes et mes malaises, et dont j'ai enfin trouvé le fin mot. (*CLP*, p. 310, 13 July 1866)
>
> [In truth, I travel, but in Unknown lands, and if, to escape the sweltering reality, I like to evoke cold images, I tell you that for a month I have been amongst the most pure glaciers of Aesthetics — that, having discovered Nothing, I discovered Beauty — and that you cannot imagine the lucid altitudes in which I venture. From this will come a dear poem on which I am working, and, this winter (or another) Hérodiade, to which I had given myself completely without realising it, from which all my uncertainties and malaises, and of which I have at last found the final word]

Mallarmé's consideration of *Hérodiade* as a winter poem is reaffirmed here, as is its role in the poet's artistic development. His absorption in *Hérodiade* over the previous months was complete and it is now that he has stepped back from the work of composition that he can begin to assess properly the significance of this work as well as the extent to which he was taken up by it. Note in the quotation above the similarity in language to the 'Scène'. Firstly there is the adjective 'inconnu', capitalized in the letter. At the end of the 'Scène', Hérodiade awaits 'une chose inconnue', and now Mallarmé seems to be making the decisive step anticipated at the end of that preparatory work. There is also the evocation of the cold altitude towards which the poet ventures. In the 'Scène' we read the following lines:

Nuit blanche de glaçons et de neige cruelle!
Et ta sœur solitaire, ô ma sœur éternelle
Mon rêve montera vers toi. (ll. 109–11)

[White night of icicles and cruel snow!
And your solitary sister, O mine forever now
My dream shall rise towards you]

Now, in the letter, Mallarmé declares to his friend Cazalis that he has been 'depuis un mois dans les plus purs glaciers de l'Esthétique' [for a month amongst the most pure glaciers of Aesthetics] and that he (Cazalis) will not be able to imagine 'dans quelles altitudes lucides je m'aventure' [the lucid altitudes in which I venture]. This same imagery is again taken up in the much later 'Cantique de Saint Jean' where Mallarmé writes of the decapitated head of the prophet:

Qu'elle de jeûnes ivres
S'opiniâtre à suivre
En quelque bond hagard
    Son pur regard

Là-haut où la froidure
Eternelle n'endure
Que vous le surpassiez
    Tous ô glaciers. (ll. 17–24)

[As drunk from fasting
It persists in following
With a haggard bound
    Its gaze profound

Up where the frozen
Absolute has chosen
That nothing shall measure
    Its vastness, O glacier][22]

The pure beauty towards which the poet ascends is consistently, therefore, associated with cold altitude and eternity.

When Mallarmé put *Hérodiade* aside for the summer he had just discovered a 'pensée écrasante' [an overwhelming thought] which had almost made him abandon his work completely; the extraordinary demand of the Absolute is 'Le Néant', 'Le Rien', and the strange space to which *Hérodiade* has led the poet and which he is now entering opens as a thought of this *nothing*.[23] In the series of missives sent to Cazalis we can follow the withdrawal from the work which has caused him so much distress and the transformation of the consciousness of the 'Néant' into a conception of beauty. It is the coordination of the thought of the 'Néant' with the thought of the 'Beau' which provokes Mallarmé to such exultant language in the last in the sequence of letters to Cazalis quoted. The poet seems finally to have understood the stakes of his work on *Hérodiade*; he has, he says, found 'le fin mot'.

Through the work on *Hérodiade*, Mallarmé discovered that the turn away from transcendence towards an absolute or immanent understanding of beauty necessarily implied the self-reflexivity of the text. In *Hérodiade*, the referential and reflexive levels of the narrative converge at points, but he has not yet achieved the necessary

purity of the Absolute (although he from time to time catches sight of it with 'horror'). The thought of 'Le Néant' is the evacuation of everything contingent (hazard, chance) from the poetic work. It is the elimination of any reference beyond the work itself. The result and condition of this elimination is the perfectly self-reflexive text.

It is difficult to know what work Mallarmé undertook during the summer of 1866. Above I quoted a letter in which he stated his intention to put *Hérodiade* to one side and to get back to the more aestival *Faune*, but it is highly likely that he dedicated himself to something else. In any case, this was an extremely important time for the poet. We know this because he says so himself in another sequence of letters, this time to Théodore Aubanel. On 16 July 1866, Mallarmé wrote to Aubanel to express his regret that a planned meeting between them had not taken place. He went on to let his friend know what was happening regarding his poetic work:

> Pour moi, j'ai plus travaillé cet été que toute ma vie, et je puis dire que j'ai travaillé pour toute ma vie. J'ai jeté les fondements d'un œuvre magnifique. Tout homme a un Secret en lui, beaucoup meurent sans l'avoir trouvé, et ne le trouveront pas parce que, morts, il n'existera plus, ni eux. Je suis mort, et ressuscité avec la clef de pierreries de ma dernière Cassette spirituelle. A moi maintenant de l'ouvrir en l'absence de toute impression empruntée, et son mystère s'émanera en un fort beau ciel. (*CLP*, p. 312)
>
> [As for me, I have worked more this summer than during the rest of my life, and I can say that I have worked all my life. I have laid the foundations of a magnificent oeuvre. Every man has a Secret in him, many die without finding it, and never will because, dead, it will no longer exist, like them. I have died and been resurrected with the bejewelled key to my final spiritual Casket. It remains for me to open it with no preconceived ideas, and its mystery will issue forth into a beautiful sky]

This letter was written just three days after the last of those cited above to Cazalis. The work that Mallarmé speaks of here must correspond to the travels in the 'purs glaciers de l'Esthétique' evoked in that letter. Again, what seems to have been happening is a transformation of the insight brought about during the work on *Hérodiade* into an amplified conception of the poet's work. In this letter to Aubanel, the reference to *Hérodiade* is dropped and Mallarmé refers to the 'fondements d'un œuvre magnifique' which he has now laid. This recalls a letter of 21 May to Cazalis in which he speaks of the 'fondements d'un livre sur le *Beau*' which he is then in the process of laying. In a note attached to this letter, the editor, Bertrand Marchal, has commented that the secret mentioned by Mallarmé is 'la conception nouvelle d'un divin non plus transcendent, mais immanent' [the new conception of an immanent divinity, no longer transcendent]. It would be difficult not to subscribe to this interpretation, and it would certainly be in accordance with the reading of the 'Scène' given above. We will see below Mallarmé recast this period of difficult work in terms of a Hegelian 'synthesis' through which God is 'terrassé'. We also note here the condition for the discovery of this secret — Mallarmé has died and been resurrected.

It takes two more letters for Mallarmé to explain sufficiently to his friend what he is talking about in this letter (his oeuvre). In the end he simply informs him that 'Je parle de "l'ensemble de travaux littéraires qui composent l'existence poétique d'un Rêveur" ' [I am speaking of the 'collection of literary works that make up the poetic existence of a Dreamer'], and adds in exasperated tones: 'Es-tu éclairé, cette fois, cher ami? Comment ne m'as-tu pas compris récemment?' [Do you get it now, dear friend? How have you not understood me recently?] (*CLP*, p. 318, 8 August 1866).

The secret that Mallarmé has discovered opens the perspective of his entire future poetics. So, at the end of the year he can write to Armand Renaud in clear prose:

> J'ai infiniment travaillé cet été, à moi d'abord, en créant, par la plus belle synthèse, un monde dont je suis le Dieu, — et à un Œuvre qui en résultera, pur et magnifique, je l'espère. *Hérodiade*, que je n'abandonne pas, mais à l'exécution duquel j'accorde plus de temps, sera une des colonnes torses, splendides et salomoniques, de ce Temple. Je m'assigne vingt ans, pour l'achever, et le reste de ma vie sera voué à une Esthétique de la Poésie. Tout est ébauché, je n'ai plus que la place de certains poèmes intérieurs à trouver, ce qui est fatal et mathématique. Ma vie entière a son *idée*, et toutes mes minutes y concourent. Je compte publier le tout d'un bloc, et ne détacher des fragments, auparavant, que pour mes intimes amis, comme vous, mon cher Armand. Quand vous lirai-je les premiers (je travaille, du reste, à tous à la fois)? (*CLP*, p. 335, 20 December 1866)
>
> [I have worked endlessly this summer, first of all on myself, creating, through the most beautiful synthesis, a world of which I am the God — and on an Œuvre which will result from this, pure and magnificent, I hope. *Hérodiade*, which I have not abandoned, and to which I am dedicating more time, will be one of the twisted, splendid, Solomonic columns of this temple. I give myself twenty years to complete it, and the rest of my life will be dedicated to an Aesthetics of Poetry. Everything is sketched out, I only have the place of certain interior poems left to find, which is inevitable and mathematic. My entire life has its *idea*, and every minute contributes to it. I plan to publish everything at once, and until then only detach fragments for my close friends, like you, dear Armand. When will I read you the first (in any case, I'm working on everything at once)?]

I have quoted from this letter at length because it provides a very useful analysis of where Mallarmé has arrived at the end of 1866. The work that he has undertaken during the summer is once again mentioned and now we learn that it was first of all work on himself. He has achieved a synthesis which has opened the perspective of a 'pure and magnificent' *Œuvre*. This synthesis, which will be discussed further below, can be coordinated with the 'secret' of the letter to Aubanel. Following the initial work on *Hérodiade*, Mallarmé has spent the summer working to convert the insights gained into a much larger, amplified, project or 'temple'. *Hérodiade* takes her place in this *Œuvre*, which Mallarmé estimates will take twenty years to complete.

2.2. Synthèse

In May 1867, the relative calm of the letter to Renaud is replaced, in a letter to Cazalis, by a more emotive tone, which nevertheless maintains similar imagery, most importantly, that of the synthesis:

> J'en suis, après une synthèse suprême, à cette lente acquisition de force — incapable tu le vois de me distraire. Mais combien plus je l'étais, il y a plusieurs mois, d'abord dans ma lutte terrible avec ce vieux et méchant plumage, terrassé, heureusement, Dieu. (*CLP*, p. 342, 14 May 1867)
>
> [I am, after a supreme synthesis, slowly gaining in strength — unable you see to stop focusing. But how much more so a few months ago, in the first place in my terrible struggle with God, that old and terrible plumage, happily brought down to earth]

The work of the preceding period has wiped the poet out and he is now slowly rebuilding his strength. This work is again understood as a synthesis and where the adjective in the letter to Renaud was 'belle', it is now 'suprême'. This synthesis is the key to Mallarmé's conception of the *Œuvre*. In the letter to Aubanel, Mallarmé spoke of a secret which, now discovered, allowed him to open up his future project; perhaps as a result of a tortured misunderstanding with the earlier correspondent, perhaps because of a deepened understanding of his work, in the letter to Renaud Mallarmé adopted an explicitly Hegelian vocabulary which is maintained in this letter to Cazalis. Marchal's note that the 'secret' of the Aubanel letter corresponds to the re-conception of a transcendent God in terms of an immanent divinity finds support in this letter. God has been, Mallarmé says, 'terrassé', that is to say brought down to earth. There is no need to read this sentence as an indication of a simple loss of religious faith, as though Mallarmé's modernism corresponded to a passage to a secular world.[24] If God is 'terrassé', this can be understood, in the broader context of Mallarmé's work, as the passage of the assumption of a transcendent measure of value into the immanence of the text. This is, after all, the logical consequence of the self-reflexive beauty narrated in the 'Scène' of *Hérodiade*.

In the reading of the 'Scène', I drew attention to a letter in which Mallarmé speaks of the sin that he committed as he conceived his vision of a new poetics. In the letter just quoted, we read the profound consequence of the synthesis and we now understand better the meaning of the sin. After a terrible struggle with the 'vieux et méchant plumage', the theological schema has been overcome and superseded. We can also understand better now the significance of Hérodiade's wait at the end of the poem. She is awaiting a strange kind of marriage or consummation (the projected later version makes this explicit in its title; *Les Noces d'Hérodiade, mystère*) which is here called a 'synthèse', and which is again evoked in the notes made by Mallarmé under the (Hegelian) title *Epouser la notion*. What was caught sight of with 'horror' has now been realized at the expense of an extraordinary effort.[25]

Further on in the letter, the importance of the synthesis for Mallarmé's *Œuvre* is again confirmed:

> Fragile comme est mon apparition terrestre, je ne puis subir que les développe-

> ments absolument nécessaires pour que l'Univers retrouve en ce moi, son identité. Ainsi je viens, à l'heure de la Synthèse, de délimiter l'œuvre qui sera l'image de ce développement. (*CLP*, p. 343, 14 May 1867)
>
> [With the fragility of my earthly presence, I can only endure the absolutely necessary developments by which the Universe rediscovers its identity in me. Thus I come, at the time of the Synthesis, to delimit the oeuvre that will be the image of this development]

The 'Synthesis' is given a definite article and capitalized to underline its significance. It is at the time of the synthesis that the poet comprehends the development which has led to this apotheosis.[26] From this perspective he is able to reconstitute the 'necessary' development which has led to the synthesis and conceive a work which will be 'l'image de ce développment'. It is through this development that the universe will rediscover its *identity* — it is the passage of a return to self. From the foregoing reading it should be clear why *Hérodiade* would be the 'Ouverture' to this work ('Trois poèmes en vers, dont Hérodiade est l'Ouverture, mais d'une pureté que l'homme n'a pas attaint [...]' [Three poems in verse, of which Hérodiade is the Overture, but of a purity that man has not achieved]). It is the work of transition, narrating the passage to a self-reflexive, pure beauty.

2.3. The History of Art (and Mallarmé's Position)

Just under a fortnight later Mallarmé wrote to his friend Eugène Lefébure, with whom he had spent time in Cannes the previous Easter, and who is considered to be the most 'Hegelian' of Mallarmé's friends. When Mallarmé describes to Lefébure how he understands his work to relate to the previous history of art, he does so in unmistakably Hegelian terms. I will quote a long extract from this letter in order to bring out the art-historical sequence that Mallarmé sketches:

> Et si je parle ainsi de *moi*, c'est qu'hier j'ai fini la première ébauche de l'œuvre, parfaitement délimitée et impérissable si je ne péris pas. Je l'ai contemplée sans extase comme sans épouvante, et, fermant les yeux, *j'ai trouvé que cela était*. La *Vénus de Milo* — que je me plais à attribuer à Phidias, tant le nom de ce grand artiste est devenu générique pour moi, *La Joconde* du Vinci, me semblent, et *sont*, les deux grandes scintillations de la Beauté sur cette terre — et cet Œuvre, tel qu'il est rêvé, la troisième. La Beauté complète et inconsciente, unique et immuable, ou la *Vénus* de Phidias, la Beauté ayant été mordue au cœur depuis le christianisme par la Chimère, et douloureusement renaissant avec un sourire rempli de mystère, mais de mystère forcé et qu'elle *sent* être la condition de son être. La Beauté, enfin, ayant par la science de l'homme, retrouvé dans l'Univers entier ses *phases corrélatives*, ayant eu le suprême mot d'elle, s'étant rappelé l'horreur secrète qui la forçait à sourire — du temps de Vinci, et à sourire mystérieusement — souriant mystérieusement maintenant, mais de bonheur et avec la quiétude éternelle de la *Vénus de Milo* retrouvée ayant su l'idée du mystère dont *La Joconde* ne savait que la sensation fatale. (*CLP*, p. 349, 27 May 1867)
>
> [And if I thus speak of *myself*, it is because yesterday I finished the first sketch of the oeuvre, perfectly delimited and imperishable, if I do not perish. I contemplated it without ecstasy and without horror, and, closing my eyes, *I*

> *found that that was that*. The *Venus de Milo* — which I like to attribute to Phidias, so much has the name of this great artist become generic for me, and da Vinci's *Joconda are*, it seems to me, the two scintillations of Beauty on this earth — and this Œuvre, as it is envisaged, the third. Beauty complete and unconscious, unique and immutable, or Phidias's *Venus*, and Beauty having been bitten in the heart since Christianity by the Chimera, and painfully reborn with a smile full of mystery, but a strained mystery that she *feels* as the condition of her being. Beauty, finally, having through the science of man rediscovered its *correlative phases* in the entire Universe, having found her supreme word, and recalled the secret horror that forced her to smile — from the time of da Vinci, and to smile mysteriously — now smiling mysteriously, but with happiness having rediscovered the eternal calm of the *Venus de Milo*, and knowing the idea of the mystery, of which the *Joconda* only knew the fated sensation]

Previously, there have been two great 'scintillations' of beauty on this earth. The first of these is the *Venus de Milo*. In this manifestation beauty is described as 'complète et inconsciente' and further on Mallarmé speaks of 'la quiétude éternelle' of the *Venus*. We saw in the previous chapter that for Hegel sculpture is the most appropriate form for the manifestation of classical beauty. In the introduction to his *Aesthetics*, speaking of the classical form of sculpture he says: 'For through sculpture the spirit should stand before us in blissful tranquillity in its bodily form' (*Aesthetics*, I, 85), and further on: 'we must claim for sculpture that in it the inward and the spiritual come into appearance for the first time in their eternal peace and essential self-sufficiency' (*Aesthetics*, I, 85). Later, in the main body of the work, Hegel writes: 'When the classical ideal figure is at its zenith, it is complete in itself, independent, reserved, unreceptive, a finished individual which rejects everything else' (*Aesthetics*, I, 532). The characterization of classical beauty is therefore strikingly similar between Mallarmé and Hegel — it is a beauty that is 'complete' in itself, but necessarily unconscious. But the parallels do not end here.

The second 'scintillation' of beauty is *La Joconde* (the *Mona Lisa*). Since Christianity, Mallarmé says, beauty has been 'mordue au cœur'; Christianity constitutes an interruption of the classical ideal of beauty. She is painfully reborn, however, but this time with a mysterious smile, in Da Vinci's painting. The correlation with Hegel's history is again striking. Mallarmé echoes the sequence of art-forms moving from sculpture to painting, and he also offers the same explanation for the disruption of the classical ideal — Christianity. Recall here that for Hegel the romantic art-form begins through an external intervention in the classical ideal: 'this new material [the content of romantic art] is not brought to our minds by the conceptions of art but is given to art from outside as an actual happening, as the history of God made flesh' (*Aesthetics*, I, 506).

Art, for Hegel, is most fully developed, in terms of its spiritual content, in poetry, and, as discussed in the first chapter, it is in poetry that the artwork encounters its limit (within its own sphere) and destroys itself as artwork. Having given his interpretation of these two earlier manifestations of beauty, Mallarmé now suggests his own *Œuvre* as a synthesis, an *Aufhebung*, into a higher, more complete manifestation. Beauty can smile again with the tranquillity of the *Venus* and the mystery of the *Mona Lisa*. Having passed through the period that separates

Mallarmé's *œuvre* from the time when the classical ideal was 'mordue au cœur', beauty has now gained the self-consciousness denied to the *Venus*, and only sensed as a mystery by the *Mona Lisa*. And this, we have seen, is achieved through the 'synthése suprême' to which Mallarmé was led in his work on *Hérodiade*.[27]

Mallarmé's Hegelianism is a subject which has received much attention in the past, particularly in mid-century scholarship.[28] Since there is no mention of the philosopher in the correspondence and only one in the *Œuvres complètes*, it is generally considered an interesting avenue of research but ultimately destined to remain inconclusive in its results.[29] With such scant direct evidence for Mallarmé's having read the texts, we are led to the more pertinent consideration of the coordination of the two bodies of work.[30] Following the favoured hypothesis regarding Mallarmé's Hegelian initiation, it took place at Cannes and through the agency of Lefébure, when Mallarmé went to visit him in the spring of 1866.[31] To support this contention we might cite the letter from May 1868 in which the poet wrote to Lefébure: 'Décidément, je redescends de l'Absolu [...] mais cette fréquentation de deux années (vous rappelez? depuis notre séjour à Cannes) me laissera une marque, dont je veux faire un Sacre' [Truly, I come back down from the Absolute [...] but this two year frequentation (you remember? since our stay in Cannes) will leave a mark on me, which I would make a Consecration] (*CLP*, p. 384, 3 May 1868). In the year that separates Mallarmé's stay in Cannes from the May 1867 letter to Lefébure (in which he sketches his history of art) we can imagine an increasing engagement with the writings of Hegel. But whatever the case may be, in the long quotation given above there is clear evidence of the poet coordinating his work with that of the philosopher, inscribing his *Œuvre* at the apotheosis of the historical development of the artwork as it is presented in the *Aesthetics*.

3. *Igitur*

3.1. Midnight

In the spring of 1867 Mallarmé has conceived of the *Œuvre*, but he has not begun to write it.[32] 'Mallarmé reste sur le seuil', says Benoit, 'travaille et approfondit le commencement, avec une sorte d'hésitation à aller plus avant' [Mallarmé remains on the threshold, working on and going deeper into the beginning, but hesitant to go further].[33] Two years later there is the first allusion to *Igitur* in the *Correspondance* (July 1869).[34] There is a significant lacuna here in the chronology I have been tracing. In the next chapter, I will fill this gap when I turn to the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* which first appears in 1868. The *Sonnet* is a very important work in the context of this study — it will be examined at length and separately. For the rest of this chapter, however, I will focus on the tale of *Igitur*.

In this work, Mallarmé's desire to access the 'azure', so overwhelmingly in evidence in the poems published in the *Parnasse contemporain*, has been replaced by the 'rêve pur d'un Minuit, en soi disparu'[35] [the pure dream of a Midnight that has disappeared into itself]. At the end of *Hérodiade*, we saw how this movement was intimated when Hérodiade asks the Nourrice to shut out the 'azure Séraphique'. This marks the crucial transition between the old dream and the new. In *Igitur*,

the achievement of this transition is considered as a task that Igitur must perform. In this final part of the chapter I will look at how this is written into the pages of the tale.

Igitur is mentioned again, in a letter to Cazalis, on 14 November 1869, and this time Mallarmé gives an indication of the significance of this work:

> A la faveur de son timbre conventuel, je te dirai un seul mot de mon travail que je te porterai l'été prochain: c'est un conte, par lequel je veux terrasser le vieux monstre de l'Impuissance, son sujet, du reste, afin de me cloitrer dans mon grand labeur déjà réétudié. S'il est fait (le conte) je suis guéri; *simila similibus.* (*CLP*, p. 452)
>
> [Taking advantage of its conventual tone, I will say just one word about the work I will bring to you next summer: it's a tale, by which I hope to bring down the old monster of Impotence, which is, moreover, its subject, so as to enclose myself in my great labour to which I have already returned. If it is done (the tale) I am healed; *simila similibus*]

In an editorial note, Marchal explains that these last words are a 'formule de l'homéopathie', suggesting that something is healed through that which resembles it. The tale of *Igitur* is a kind of remedy for the poet who hopes to overcome his sterility. This phase of 'impuissance' has been brought on as Mallarmé attempts to confront the demands of the poetics he came to after *Hérodiade* and so the poet hopes that through writing he will overcome his hesitation. *Igitur* is not conceived here as a part of the *Œuvre*, but as a cure that will allow him to continue with his work, and it is situated on the threshold of the great project.

Mallarmé's crippling hesitation is a logical consequence of the project he has embarked upon: the self-conscious beauty he has conceived corresponds to the dissolution of the artwork within its own sphere, as examined in the first chapter of this book, and this movement is strictly speaking impossible. In this section, where *Igitur* is the specific focus, I will argue that through his work on the tale the poet displays a deepening understanding of the demands of the pure work along with its implications. I will return to *Igitur* later, at which time I will be interested in the way in which the failure to close down on a self-identical Absolute is already indicated here. For the moment, I am more interested in how the desire of the Absolute animates the work, and in how this Absolute is coordinated with the final dissolution of the artwork considered in Chapter 1.

In his analysis of *Igitur* at the beginning of *Vers une explication rationnelle du 'Coup de dés'*, Gardner Davies argues that the section entitled 'Vie d'Igitur' (section III as it is published in the *Œuvres complètes*) was amongst the first drafts of the tale. While it is impossible to say with any certainty when this section of *Igitur* was written, the proximity in language to *Hérodiade* (greater than in any of the other sections) suggests that it is situated close to that poem, if not in time then certainly in its concerns, and offers the reader a means of connecting the highly abstract formulations of the tale with the poem.

In the analysis of *Hérodiade* I drew attention to the function of the mirror in the poem. Beyond being a simple narrative element that would reflect Hérodiade's beauty it was seen to be the key structural mechanism of the reflexive work.

Here, in 'Vie d'Igitur', the horrific vision that confronts the poet in the mirror, his 'Rêve dans sa nudité idéal', is obsessively recalled: 'et Igitur comme menacé par le supplice d'être éternel qu'il pressent vaguement, se cherchant dans la glace devenue ennui et se voyant vague et près de disparaitre comme s'il allait évanouir en le temps' [and Igitur, as though threatened by the ordeal of being eternal which he feels vaguely, looking for himself in the mirror that has become troubling and seeing himself as indistinct and close to disappearing as though he were going to vanish in time] (*Igitur*, in *OC*, p. 440); 'voyant la glace horriblement nulle' [seeing the mirror horribly non-existent] (p. 440); 'je suppliais de rester une vague figure qui disparaissait complètement dans la glace confondue [...] dans une épouvantable sensation d'éternité' [I was begging to remain an indistinct figure which disappeared completely in the confounded mirror [...] in a dreadful sensation of eternity] (p. 440); 'Et quand je rouvrais les yeux au fond du miroir, je voyais le personnage d'horreur' [And when I opened my eyes again in the depths of the mirror, I saw the horrific figure] (p. 441). The letter of 20 April 1868 written to François Coppée (cited above) is also very close to the concerns of 'La Vie d'Igitur', particularly to the last paragraph of the passage, where the horrific vision is also a vision of unheard of purity. The last quotation given continues:

> le fantôme d'horreur absorber peu à peu ce qui restait de sentiment et de douleur dans la glace, nourrir son horreur des suprêmes frissons des chimères et de l'instabilité des tentures, et se former en raréfiant la glace jusqu'à une pureté inouïe, — jusqu'à ce qu'il se détachât, permanent, de la glace absolument pure, comme pris dans son froid(p. 441)
>
> [the horrific ghost absorb little by little what remained of feeling and suffering in the mirror, feed his horror of the supreme shivers of chimeras and of the instability of wall-hangings, and form himself by rarefying the mirror to an unheard of purity — to the point that he detached himself, permanent, from the absolutely pure mirror, as though taken in its cold]

The role of the mirror is augmented to the extent that it becomes synonymous with the work itself. Just as Hérodiade encounters a vision of her nudity in the mirror, so the poet/Igitur discovers his 'Rêve' in the mirror of the work. If we continue a little with the notion of the poem as a mirror then the enigmatic phrase in the quotation where the 'personnage d'horreur' is understood to 'se former en raréfiant la glace jusqu'à une pureté inouïe' becomes clearer; the 'personage d'horreur' emerges as the mirror or poem is refined to an extreme purity.[36] The purity is qualified here as 'inouïe' and the mirror described as 'absolument pure' — the whole of *Igitur* is animated by the thought of this absolute purity and, as such, it is an exploration of the demands of its accomplishment. It is interesting to note that at the highest stage of this process of rarification, there is a detachment from the mirror, and the dissolution of the figure of Igitur — Igitur who continually catches sight of himself in the mirror as he is on the point of disappearing. This detachment/dissolution coordinates with the final overcoming of the sensuous limitation of art considered in the reading of the *Aesthetics* in the first chapter (and, we will see later, with the overcoming of the 'limit' (*borne*) to the infinite in *Un Coup de dés*). We saw there that Hegel considered this dissolution in terms of a risk: 'poetry runs the risk of

losing itself in a transition from the region of sense into that of the spirit' (*Aesthetics*, II, 968). We now see this risk assumed in *Igitur*.

We can gain a better understanding of the movement considered in *Igitur* through a consideration of the title of the tale, which is also the name of the protagonist. It is significant that *Igitur* is not so much a name as a logical function. There has been much speculation as to Mallarmé's reasons for using the Latin word for 'therefore', but in the framework of the present reading this usage can be readily understood. I spent some time above looking at the 'Synthèse' as it is evoked in Mallarmé's correspondence. The argument was that Mallarmé at this time coordinates his own poetic production with the art-historical development as it is presented in Hegel's *Aesthetics*, placing his own work at the apotheosis of this development. In *Igitur* Mallarmé returns to this same schema, attempting to comprehend better the movement already envisaged, but this time within the pages of a 'beau conte'. If we go back a moment to the letter to Cazalis in which Mallarmé is most explicit about the 'Synthèse', we read, in the paragraph preceding the quotation given above, the following famous lines: 'C'est t'apprendre que je suis maintenant impersonnel, et non plus Stéphane que tu as connu, — mais une aptitude qu'a l'Univers Spirituel à se voir et à se développer, à travers ce qui fut moi' [This is to tell you that I am now impersonal, and not the Stéphane you knew, — but an aptitude that the Spiritual Universe has to see and develop itself, across that which was me] (*CLP*, p. 343, 14 May 1867). Stéphane Mallarmé the man dies here to be resurrected as an 'aptitude' with the specific task of permitting the self-comprehension of the spiritual universe. Mallarmé has arrived at the logical consequence of the poetic task he must fulfil.[37] When he comes to write of this extreme movement in *Igitur*, he necessarily depersonalizes his protagonist, who both is and is no longer equivalent to the poet. *Igitur* is a logical function delivering the conclusion of a syllogism or synthesis.[38] As is the case in the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* (see Chapter 3), the poet himself dies and it is on the condition of this absence that the pure work can be achieved by an 'aptitude', a logical function, the implied 'therefore' of a syllogism.

In the last section of part 2, I stressed Mallarmé's developmental comprehension of art through the course of history. This comprehension is reinforced here since the act that *Igitur* is tasked with accomplishing takes place after a temporal deferral which we may take to be a historical development in the Hegelian sense. This is not only approximately Hegelian, it is specifically and explicitly so. In section IV, the last included amongst the 'Scolies', we read: 'Telle est la marche inverse de la *notion* dont il n'a pas connu l'ascension, étant adolescent, arrivé à l'Absolu' [Such is the inverse progression of the *notion* of which he did not know the ascension, having arrived at the Absolute as an adolescent] (p. 450); and 'il faut que je meure, et comme cette fiole contient le Néant par ma race différé jusqu'à moi [...] je ne veux pas connaitre le Néant, avant d'avoir rendu aux miens ce pourquoi ils m'ont engendré' [it is necessary that I die, and as this vial contains the Nothing differed by my race until me [...] I do not want to know Nothing, before having returned to my people that for which they engendered me] (p. 450).

Midnight is 'l'heure de la Synthèse'. Midnight is a strange time because it escapes time. It is like the point of inflection on a curve, being both the end of one day

and the beginning of another (like a sunrise confused with a sunset). Both 24 and 0, it is neither one nor the other, and in this way it is the punctual 'now' of pure presence (see Chapter 5). The whole of the tale takes place in this non-temporal time. Midnight is therefore 'l'unique heure' when *Igitur* 'descend les escaliers, de l'esprit humaine, va au fond des choses: en "absolu" qu'il est' [goes down the staircase, of human spirit, goes to the bottom of things: to the 'absolute' that he is] (p. 434). *Igitur* is even confused with midnight: 'J'étais l'heure qui doit me rendre pur' [I was the hour that must make me pure] (p. 435).[39] *Igitur*, it was noted above, is a tale which the poet hopes will allow him to pass through a phase of 'impuissance', and, as was the case with *Hérodiade*, it refers to nothing outside of itself. Hence the confusion of the protagonist's name with the function that he is (also the title of the tale). Midnight is the unique time of the tale and since the tale relates nothing other than its own gesture, the action remains rigorously within the space/time of its own inscription, turning back on itself in a 'spirale vertigineuse' (p. 437).

Midnight is the annulment of time. The references to clocks and time in the text indicate this: 'C'est le rêve pur d'un Minuit, en soi disparu' [It is the pure dream of a Midnight, disappeared into itself] (p. 435); 'la Nuit resta avec une douteuse perception de pendule qui va s'éteindre et expirer en lui' [the Night remained with a doubtful perception of the clock that will extinguish itself and expire in him] (p. 436). The conception of the Absolute as the end of time refers us directly to the last pages of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, especially these famous lines:

> Time is the Notion itself that *is there* and which presents itself to consciousness as empty intuition; for this reason, Spirit necessarily appears in Time, and it appears in Time just so long as it has not *grasped* its pure Notion, i.e. has not annulled Time [...] Time, therefore, appears as the destiny and necessity of Spirit that is not yet complete within itself.[40]

The Absolute is, of course, Hegel's word for spirit which is 'complete within itself'. In *Igitur* the passage to the Absolute is achieved through the accomplishment of a 'geste' in which chance ('le hasard') is annulled. This 'geste', which will obsess the poet for his whole life and which reappears as the explicit subject of *Un Coup de dés*, is to roll the dice and achieve a double six, twelve (midnight). Mallarmé's poetic project is identified with this act (j'etais/jetter l'heure [I was/throw the hour]), and through it he will evacuate everything contingent from the work (abolish chance), consecrating in this movement a pure, self-reflexive, absolute beauty.[41] In the second section 'Il quitte la chambre et se perd dans les escaliers' [He leaves the chamber and gets lost in the stairway], we read the following musing:

> Dois-je encore craindre le hasard, cet antique ennemi qui me divisa en ténèbres et en temps créés, pacifiés là tous deux en un même somme? et n'est-il pas par la fin du temps, qui amena celle des ténèbres, lui-même annulé? (p. 438)
>
> [Must I still fear chance, that old enemy that divided me into darkness and created time, both of them pacified there in one same sum? and is it not by the end of time, which brought that of darkness, itself annulled?]

In *Un coup de dés*, Mallarmé will return to this reflection and answer the second of his questions with a no in bold capitals. 'UN COUP DE DÉS' [A THROW OF THE

DICE], the central thread of the poem tells us, 'JAMAIS N'ABOLIRA LE HASARD' [WILL NEVER ABOLISH CHANCE]. With this we are left to consider a profound temporal movement — the opening of a time that has outlived beauty.

3.2. The 'Book'

In the autobiographical letter written to Verlaine in 1885 Mallarmé confided that he had spent the last twenty years dreaming of and attempting 'autre chose' (*OC*, p. 661). Like an alchemist he has dedicated everything to his 'Grand Œuvre', but when he comes to say exactly what this work is, it is difficult to find the words. This is his famous description:

> un livre, tout bonnement, en maints tomes, un livre qui soit un livre, architectural et prémédité, et non un recueil des inspirations de hasard fussent-elles merveilleuses [...] j'irai plus loin, je dirai: le Livre, persuadé qu'au fond il n'y a qu'un, tenté à son insu par quiconque a écrit, mêmes les Génies. L'explication orphique de la Terre, qui est le seul devoir du poète et le jeu littéraire par excellence: car le rythme même du livre, alors impersonnel et vivant, jusque dans sa pagination, se juxtapose aux équations de ce rêve, ou Ode. (*OC*, p. 663)
>
> [a book, quite simply, in many volumes, a book that is a book, architectual and thought through, and not a collection of chance inspirations, however wonderful [...] I'll go further and say: the Book, convinced that ultimately there is but one, attempted without their knowledge by who everyone has written, even Geniuses. The Orphic explanation of the earth, which is the poet's only duty and the literary game *par excellence*: because the very rhythm of the book, now impersonal and living, including its pagination, is juxtaposed with the equations of this dream, with the Ode]

Twenty years takes us back to 1865 and the beginning of the crucial period reconstructed above when the work on *Hérodiade* led Mallarmé to the abstract speculations of *Igitur*. What Mallarmé now calls the 'Livre' is the impersonal work that would be the consequence of the synthesis he attempts to 'stage' in that story. Why has it proved so difficult to execute? We might answer this question: because it is impossible. The following quotation is from Benoit's *Mallarmé et le mystère du 'Livre'*:

> Hégélien ou mallarméen, le schème métaphysique est le même; la différence est que, là où Hegel institue la Religion et surtout la Philosophie comme phases plus achevées que l'Art, dans le Retour de l'Esprit en lui-même, c'est à la Poésie que Mallarmé accorde la tâche suprême de ramener le monde sensible à l'unité de l'Absolu ainsi reconstitué, en intégrant au Livre religion et philosophe.[42]
>
> [Hegelian or Mallarmean, the metaphysical schema is the same; the difference being that there where Hegel establishes Religion and above all Philosophy as more fully accomplished phases than Art, in the Return of Spirit to itself, it is to Poetry that Mallarmé grants the supreme task of bringing the sensible world to the unity of the Absolute which is thus reconstituted, integrating religion and philosophy into the Book]

I have made this quotation here because it quite neatly states the understanding of Mallarmé's 'Livre' which has guided my readings of *Hérodiade* and *Igitur* in this

chapter. It also allows me to return briefly to the concerns of the first chapter and account for the extraordinary difficulties Mallarmé encounters as he attempts to produce even a fragment of the 'Livre'.

In the first chapter I drew attention to the hierarchy that Hegel establishes between the three regions of the Absolute, placing philosophy above the other two as the highest and ultimate sphere in the self-revelation of spirit. The artwork remains at a lower level as its sensuous nature prevents it from achieving the necessary purity required by the Absolute. It was noted, however, that poetry occupies an ambiguous position in the *Aesthetics* which permits Hegel to speak of it as the site of the self-dissolution of the artwork at its point of passage to the prose of pure thought. This movement, it was seen, was both permitted and disallowed by Hegel's text. The work on *Hérodiade* led Mallarmé to the realization that absolute beauty implied a perfectly self-reflexive work, and it is in *Igitur* and his correspondence from this period that we are confronted by its extraordinary, paradoxical demands. In the next chapter, I will focus attention on the sunset as a mechanism through which Mallarmé attempts to enact the drama of the passage to the Absolute. This will be done through a reading of the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même.* The success of this poem in achieving an absolute self-reflexivity by its exclusion of anything external from the work will be seen, however, to be highly ambiguous. The reading of this *Sonnet* will therefore pave the way for the theoretical interventions of Blanchot and Derrida in Chapters 4 and 5.

Notes to Chapter 2

1. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance, lettres sur la poésie*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 341 (letter to Cazalis, 14 May 1867), hereafter referred to as *CLP*.
2. A.R. Chisholm, *Towards Hérodiade: A Literary Genealogy* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1934), p. 160.
3. In the 1871 edition of *Le Parnasse contemporain*.
4. In the reading below line numbers refer to the version of the 'Scène' published in the 1992 edition of *Poésies*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal, (Paris: Gallimard). In this edition, the 'Ouverture ancienne' and the 'Cantique' (published together with the 'Scène' in the *Œuvres completes*) are included in an appendix entitled *Hérodiade*. The 'Ouverture ancienne' is separated from the rest of the poem, and the 'Cantique' is now placed with the new 'Prélude', the 'Scène', the new 'Scène intermédiaire' and the new 'Finale'. The ensemble (without the 'Ouverture ancienne') constitutes *Les Noces d'Hérodiade, mystère*.
5. *La Religion de Mallarmé*, p. 65.
6. This is reinforced in an earlier letter to Eugène Lefébure in which Mallarmé thanks him for sending historical detail on his subject: 'Merci du détail que vous me donnez, au sujet *d'Hérodiade*, mais je ne m'en sers pas. La plus belle page de mon œuvre sera celle qui ne contiendra que ce nom divin Hérodiade. Le peu d'inspiration que j'ai eu, je le dois à ce nom, et je crois que si mon héroïne s'était appelée Salomé, j'eusse inventé ce mot sombre, et rouge comme une grenade ouverte, Hérodiade. Du reste, je tiens à en faire un être purement rêvé et absolument indépendant de l'histoire' [Thank you for the information you gave me, on the subject of *Hérodiade*, but I will make no use of it. The most beautiful page of my œuvre will be the one on which there is nothing but this divine name, Hérodiade. I owe the little inspiration that I have had to this name, and I believe that had my heroine been called Salome, I would have invented this sombre word, red like an open pomegranate, Hérodiade. Besides, I'm attempting to create a purely imaginary being, absolutely independent of history] (*CLP*, p. 223 (letter dated 18 February 1865).

7. Cf. Charles Mauron's *Introduction à la psychanalyse de Mallarmé* (Geneva: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1950): 'Je ne sais pas si dans ce qui précède j'ai suffisamment marqué que Mallarmé, par pensée absolue, entend "conscience de soi". La pensée absolue est celle qui se pense elle-même. Mallarmé dit cela expressément dans une lettre fameuse (14 mai 1867): "ma Pensée s'est pensée et est arrivée à une Conception pure"' [I do not know if in what came before I sufficiently emphasized that by absolute thought, Mallarmé means 'self-consciousness'. Absolute thought is that which thinks itself. Mallarmé says as much in a famous letter (14 May 1867): "my Thought has thought itself and arrived at a pure Conception"'] (p. 143).
8. For more information concerning Mallarmé's changing conception of the poem, see the introduction to Mallarmé, *Les Noces d'Hérodiade, mystère (publié avec une introduction par Gardner Davies d'après les manuscrits inachevés de Stéphane Mallarmé)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959).
9. Translations of *Hérodiade* are from Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, trans. by Henry Weinfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). I have occasionally modified the translation to emphasize my reading. When I have done so, I have not thought it necessary to attempt to maintain the syllable count or the rhyme scheme.
10. In Chapter 4 in particular we will see how death as a requirement of the accomplished work is infinitely complicated in Blanchot's reading of *Igitur*. In his *Introduction à la psychoanalyse de Mallarmé*, Mauron comments on these lines: 'Arrêtons-nous pour l'instant à cette idée de pureté intangible et notons que si pour Mallarmé, en 1868 [...] les deux idées de pensée absolue et de mort se confondent, déjà en 1865 ce sont les deux idées de beauté absolue et de mort que lie l'esprit du poète' [Let us dwell a moment on this idea of inviolable purity and note that if for Mallarmé in 1868 [...] the two notions of absolute thought and death are intertwined, already in 1865, the two ideas of absolute beauty and death are associated in the mind of the poet] (p. 124).
11. For further discussion of the significance of 'mineral' substances in the poetry of Baudelaire and Mallarmé, see the chapter 'Baudelaire' in Chisholm's *Towards Hérodiade*, especially pp. 73–75. 'Minerals [...] are nearer the absolute, as they are inanimate. For life is a differentiation of cosmic energy, whereas inanimate substances resemble more closely the Indivisible, the Increate. Further, they are a symbol of that sterility which is also an adumbration of the increate, and which Baudelaire admires as much as Mallarmé' (p. 74).
12. For discussions of the significance of the mirror in Mallarmé, and in French Symbolist poetry more generally, see Austin Gill, 'Le Symbole du miroir dans l'oeuvre de Mallarmé', *Cahiers de l'association international des etudes français*, 11 (1959), 159–81, and, in the same publication, Guy Michaud, 'Le Thème du mirroir dans le symbolisme français' (pp. 199–216).
13. The word 'Ideal' has been imported by Weinfield in his translation. I have left this unaltered because it is certainly justifiable. I have, however, reintroduced the notion of 'horror' which he had dropped.
14. It is this movement that opens the 'modern' period as a reconfiguration of sovereignty.
15. In *Towards Hérodiade*, Chisholm presents the following quotation from E. Levi's *Histoire de la magie*, which is of interest as we consider this poem in terms of a rite of initiation: 'The most savage animals quail before a steady glance [...] They are paralysed and awe-stricken by projections of the Austral light. When Daniel was accused of imposture by false Magi, both he and his accusers were subjected by the kings of Babylon to an ordeal of lions [...] The kings of Assyria kept tigers, leopards and lions in their gardens in a state of docility. Others were reserved in vaults beneath the temples for use in ordeals of initiation (Waite's translation, p. 61)' (p. 157).
16. 'méchant plumage' from Mallarmé's correspondence, 14 May 1867, and 'plumage héraldique' from the 'Ouverture ancienne' (l. 4). In the word 'plumage' we should, of course, hear a reference to the poet's pen. One writing, tied to a theological time, is being surpassed by another which is heralded in *Hérodiade*.
17. On this subject see Bertrand Marchal, *Lecture de Mallarmé* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1985), and Roger Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
18. Commenting on this passage of the poem, Marchal writes in *La Religion de Mallarmé* that: 'Cette conversion du rêve d'Hérodiade a évidemment une dimension religieuse: l'azure que la vierge renie derrière ses volets est "l'azur Séraphique", le ciel encombré d'anges de tant de poèmes

anciens, et elle a conscience que le paradis dont elle garde la nostalgie a la couleur du lait de l'enfance, de ce temps où la religion tenait lieu de nourrice spirituelle et rassasiait les soifs de l'infini, comme si elle faisait à travers la *Scène* l'épreuve d'un sevrage symbolique, celui de la religion maternelle' [This conversion of Hérodiade's dream clearly has a religious dimension: the azure that the virgin shuts out behind the shutters is the 'Seraphic azure' — the heavens filled with angles from so many earlier poems — and she understands that the paradise for which she is nostalgic has the colour of the milk of childhood, of that time when religion served as the spiritual nursemaid and satisfied the thirst for the infinite, as though across the *Scène* she were going through the ordeal of a symbolic separation from the maternal religion] (p. 50). In linking together the religious crisis, the achievement of the Absolute, and 'le drame solaire', I am bound to agree, to a certain extent with Marchal's analysis. It is when we come to consider the ambiguity of the sunset in Chapter 3 that we will seek to move beyond this reading.

19. In his book *Mallarmé: Igitur*, R.G. Cohn argues that the scene of maturation narrated in *Hérodiade* more broadly reflects Mallarmé's maturation as a poet: 'This drama of maturation is the substance of Mallarmé's correspondence and of his production in the 1860s (his age: 18–28), i.e. the period of his late adolescence, which is generally prolonged in genius of this stripe. This crisis culminates in the figure of Hérodiade, in the mid-sixties, reflected by *Igitur*, a few years later' (p. 4). I will go on to look at the way in which this drama is 'reflected' by *Igitur* below.
20. *AUMLA* 10 (May, 1959), 46–59 (p. 54).
21. *La Religion de Mallarmé*, p. 64.
22. Translation from *Mallarmé: Collected Poems*, translated by Henry Weinfield. The translation of 'Eternelle' by 'Absolute' is Weinfield's — I have not thought it necessary to change this.
23. The coordination of the Absolute with 'le Néant' is emphasized in Scherer's article 'Hegel et Hégélianisme' in *Revue des deux mondes*, 31 (February 1861), 812–56, which Lloyd James Austin has convincingly shown that Mallarmé must have read, see 'Mallarmé et le rêve du "Livre"', in *Essais sur Mallarmé* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995). Scherer wrote: 'l'absolu n'est pas seulement insaisissable, il est contradictoire. Comment le définit-on en effet? Par l'absence de limite. L'absolu est une notion purement négative [...] C'est le néant présentifié; c'est-à-dire la contradiction même. Or l'hégélianisme n'est pas autre chose que la philosophie de ce néant' [the absolute is not only unreachable, it is contradictory. How to define it? By the absence of limit. The absolute is a purely negative concept [...] It is nothing presented; or contradiction itself. But Hegelianism is nothing but the philosophy of this nothing]. For further comment on Mallarmé and the Hegelian negative see: Eric Benoit, *Mallarmé et le mystère du 'Livre'*, p. 325; J.-P. Richard, 'Mallarmé et le rien: d'après un fragment inédit', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 64 (October-December 1964), 633–44; Austin Gill, *Esquisse d'une explication de la Vie d'Igitur*, extract from *Saggi e ricerche di letteratura francese* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1961), p. 176.
24. On Mallarmé's distrust of the notion of secularity see 'De même': 'Considérons aussi que rien, en dépit de l'insipide tendance, ne se montrera exclusivement laïque, parce que ce mot n'élit pas précisément de sens' [Let us also consider that nothing, despite the insipid tendency, ever turns out to be exclusively secular, because this word does not exactly have any sense], *OC*, p. 397.
25. Mallarmé, *Epouser la notion*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Richard (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1992). See also Richard's article 'Mallarmé et le rien'.
26. 'l'heure', c.f. 'Ouverture ancienne': 'A l'heure d'agonie et de luttes funèbres' [At the hour of agony and funereal struggles] (l. 53); and 'Et bientôt sa rougeur de triste crépuscule' [And soon in redness of sad crepuscule] (l. 85); 'rougeur' *hom.* rouge heure (see Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé*). The synthesis is historically (temporally) inscribed and I note here a first coordination with the sunset.
27. In his book *Mallarmé et le mystère du 'Livre'*, Benoit annotates this letter as follows: 'le 17 Mai 1867, Mallarmé présente à Lefébure le projet de l'Œuvre, où l'on retrouve encore une triade hégélienne mais féminisée: "La *Vénus de Milo* [...], la *Joconde* du Vinci [...] et cet Œuvre": la première est "la beauté complète et *inconsciente*" (encore en-soi), la seconde est "la Beauté ayant été mordue au cœur depuis le Christianisme par la Chimère et *douloureusement renaissant*" (phase négative, incarnation, douleur mortelle précédant résurrection), l'Œuvre étant "la Beauté, enfin, ayant *par la science de l'homme retrouvé* dans l'Univers entier ses phases corrélatives" (retour, synthèse)' [on the 17th May, Mallarmé presents his projected Work to his friend, and

we find here another Hegelian triad, feminized this time: 'the *Venus de Milo*... the *Joconda* by Vinci... and this Work': the first is complete and *unconscious* beauty (still in itself), the second is 'Beauty having been bitten in the heart since Christianity and *painfully reborn* (negative phase, incarnation, mortal pain preceding resurrection), with the Work being 'Beauty, finally, having *by the science of man* rediscovered its correlative phases in the Universe as a whole' (return, synthesis)]. Benoit notes, therefore the massively Hegelian connotations, but he does not make the explicit link with the *Aesthetics* that we have recognized here.

28. For more on the question of Mallarmé's Hegelianism see: Lloyd James Austin, 'Mallarmé et le rêve du "Livre"' in *Essais sur Mallarmé*; J.-P. Richard, *L'Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1961), especially p. 231, where Richard supplies a generous list of further biographical references on this subject.
29. In the 'Conférence' on Villiers de l'Isle-Adam given in Belgium in 1889–90 where Mallarmé speaks of Hegel as the 'Titan de l'Esprit Humain'. Hegel was clearly a common point of interest for Mallarmé and Villiers. In a letter dated 11 September 1866, Villiers congratulated Mallarmé on his interest in Hegel: '*Quant à Hegel*, je suis vraiment heureux que vous ayez accordé quelque attenton à ce miraculeux génie' [*As for Hegel*, I am really delighted that you have paid some attention to this miraculous genius], *Correspondance*, ed. by H. Mondor and J.-P. Richard (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), I, 231 (note 1).
30. On the subject of the texts available for Mallarmé, I would, however, insist on one observation; by 1867 there had been seven publications of Hegel's work in the French language (not including re-editions). Of these seven, two were full editions of the *Aesthetics* and two were extracts from the *Aesthetics*, see Michael Kelley, *Hegel in France* (Birmingham: Birmingham Modern Languages Publications, 1992). The early reading of Hegel in France must, therefore, have orbited closely around Hegel's consideration of art.
31. See Richard, *L'Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*, p. 231. Marchal is not so sure, see *La Religion de Mallarmé*, pp. 58–59. Some commentators are less cautious regarding what happened on this trip (Eric Benoit, for example, writes: 'C'est en 1866, juste après les vacances de Pâques passées à Cannes avec Lefébure qui lui parle du Bouddhisme et de Hegel, qu'apparaissent sous la plume de Mallarmé les premiers projets relatifs à un Livre total, absolu, universel, eschatologique' [It is in 1866, just after the Easter holiday spent in Cannes with Lefébure who spoke to him of Buddhism and Hegel, that the first projects relating to an absolute, universal, eschatological, total book appeared in Mallarmé's writings], in *Mallarmé et le mystère du 'Livre'*, p. 14).
32. In fact, the next poem to be written by Mallarmé will be the 'Sonnet allégorique de lui-même' which was sent to Cazalis in July 1868. This poem has been the subject of much inquiry and it will be looked at more closely in the next chapter.
33. *Mallarmé et le mystère du 'Livre'*, p. 16.
34. Letter to Cazalis: 'Au moins [...] mon vieux, je travaille: même autrement le mal augment, et inutilement. Si j'en puis enfin extraire un beau conte — vous l'aurez' [At least [...] my friend, I am working: even if the illness gets much worse, and uselessly. If I can eventually extract a fine story from this — you will have it], *CLP*, p. 440 ([13, 20, or 27] July 1869).
35. Mallarmé, *Igitur*, in *OC*, p. 435.
36. See also my reading of *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* in Chapter 3.
37. Speaking of *Igitur* in his *Introduction à la psychoanalyse de Mallarmé*, Mauron writes: 'Le seul point qui nous intéresse est l'association entre les idées de pensée absolue et de mort, qui en est l'aboutissement. *Igitur*, en fait n'a pas d'autre sujet' [The only point that interests us is the association between the reflections on absolute thought and death, which is where it ultimately leads. In fact, *Igitur* has no other subject] (p. 139); and then, 'Il n'est pas contestable [...] que l'acte où Igitur réalise sa pensée absolue soit un suicide' [It is beyond doubt [...] that the act in which Igitur realises absolute thought is a suicide]. What happens if, at this limit, it is discovered that death is not a possibility, that death cannot be experienced as such and remains an impossibility? This is the question that Maurice Blanchot poses in his reading: '*Igitur* est un récit abandonné qui témoigne d'une certitude à laquelle le poète n'a pas pu se tenir. Car il n'est pas sûr que la mort soit un acte, car il se pourrait que le suicide ne fût possible. Puis-je me donner la mort?' [*Igitur* is an abandoned narrative which bears witness to a certainty that the poet could not maintain. Because it is not sure that death is an act, because it may be that suicide is not possible. Can I

kill myself?] (*L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), p. 45, hereafter referred to as *EL*). I will return to this in Chapter 4 when I look at Blanchot's reading of Poulet.

38. See again Mauron's *Introduction à la psychoanalyse de Mallarmé*: 'Ainsi les générations d'aïeux se sont succédé [...] Survient leur ultime héritier, le héros du conte. Il s'appelle Igitur, c'est-à-dire *donc* et son nom signifie qu'il va conclure, conduire la suite des générations à son terme logique, comme la dernière proposition d'un théorème met fin à une série de raisonnements, la consomme et la consacre' [Thus the generations of ancestors followed each other [...] Their final person in this heritage arrives, the hero of the tale. He is called Igitur, that is *therefore* and his name means that he is going to conclude, bring the sequence of generations to its logical end, like the final proposition of a theorem brings a process of reasoning to an end, consummates and consecrates it] (p. 141).
39. We may hear the verb 'jetter' at the beginning of this sentence. Igitur would then 'throw' the hour which makes him pure, twelve/midnight — a double six.
40. Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 487.
41. In his book *Beauty and Truth: A Study of Hegel's 'Aesthetics'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), Stephen Bungay gives the following definition of the adjective 'absolute': 'The word "absolute", when used as an adjective, indicates a relation of identity, such that all otherness is eliminated and the subject is not dependent on anything outside itself: an absolute relation is a pure self-relation' (p. 28).
42. *Mallarmé et le mystère du 'Livre'*, p. 301.

CHAPTER 3



'Le Drame solaire': *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*

> C'est bien ce que j'observe sur moi — je n'ai créé mon œuvre que par *élimination*, et toute vérité acquise ne naissait que de la perte d'une impression qui, ayant étincelé, s'était consommée et me permettait, grâce à ses ténèbres dégagées, d'avancer profondément dans la sensation des Ténèbres absolues. La destruction fut ma Béatrice.
>
> [This is exactly what I notice with myself — I have only created my work by way of *elimination*, and any truth gained was only born of the loss of an impression which, having gleamed, disappeared and allowed me, thanks to the darkness released, to advance deeply into the sensation of absolute Darkness. Destruction was my Beatrice]
>
> Stéphane Mallarmé[1]

> If there is no essence of literature — i.e., self-identity of the literary thing — if what is announced or promised as literature never gave itself as such, that means, amongst other things, that a literature that talked only about literature or a work that was purely self-referential would immediately be annulled. You'll say that that's maybe what's happening. In which case it is the experience of the nothing-ing of nothing that interests our desire under the name of literature. Experience of Being, nothing less, nothing more, on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself. It's the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world.
>
> Jacques Derrida[2]

In Chapters 4 and 5, we will find the name 'Mallarmé' evoked to mark the opening of the 'literary' according to Blanchot's and Derrida's understanding of this term. As such, his text is understood to operate a kind of transition. It is the function of this chapter to provide an account of how this transition is effected in Mallarmé's writings. In order to do this, I am going to turn to what was recognized at various points in twentieth-century Mallarmé scholarship to be a central motif in his work. I will argue that through a consideration of the 'sunset' in Mallarmé's work we can contemplate both the closure of the 'book' *and* the opening of the space of 'littérature'.[3] It will be understood, therefore, as a hinge, a closing/opening mechanism.

There are two books which famously deal with 'Le Drame solaire' in Mallarmé's work. The first to be written is *Mallarmé et le drame solaire* by Gardner Davies (1959). The second is *La Religion de Mallarmé*, by Bertrand Marchal (1988). The two authors put forward strikingly different theses concerning the import of the solar drama for Mallarmé's poetics.

To summarize very quickly, Davies draws on his understanding of transposition as it is outlined in Mallarmé's more theoretical writings to argue that the sunset enacts the annihilation of the natural order so that it can be resurrected ideally in the poetic work. Mallarmé makes perhaps his most explicit declarations on this mechanism in 'Théodore de Banville', where he says that '*La divine transposition*, pour l'accomplissement de quoi existe l'homme, *va du fait à l'idéal*' [*The divine transposition*, for the accomplishment of which man exists, *goes from the thing to the ideal*].[4]

In *La Religion de Mallarmé* Marchal's reading develops as a complex interrogation of Mallarmé's writings to argue that his oeuvre can be properly understood as an obsessive return to the originary anguish of man confronted by the eternal tragedy of nature, the disappearance of the sun at the end of the day, which has been repressed until its resurgence in Mallarmé's texts.

That these readings are both possible would perhaps indicate an ambiguity in the texts themselves. Is it then possible that the sunset is essentially ambiguous? It is this position that says both and neither (both the victorious accomplishment of the Absolute and the return of an originary trauma, and therefore neither the one nor the other exclusively) that I will be tracing in this chapter.

This will be undertaken through a reading of the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* which, in its later incarnation in the 1887 *Poésies* as *Ses purs ongles très haut...*, has been the subject of so much interpretative work. Commentators often broach the 'Sonnet en yx' with a sense of fatigue, as though it has been so thoroughly studied that there can be precious little left to say about it.[5] In the present context, however, it has emerged as an unavoidable reference, which will allow me to account for an effect of 'transition' readable in Mallarmé's texts.[6] In fact, it is this 'precious little', this 'next to nothing', that will destabilize and displace the text in the very movement of its closure.

Before turning to read the poem itself, I will say something about the context of its production, linking it to the reading of *Hérodiade* given above. Why, then, is this sonnet of such importance in terms of the trajectory I traced through the last chapter?

In the first place, it is bound into the context there reconstructed by the brute fact of its date of composition.[7] It is first mentioned in a letter to Lefébure written on 3 May 1868.[8] In this letter Mallarmé tells his friend of a sonnet he has been writing and asks him to send him the 'real' meaning of the word 'ptyx', which he claims to have invented himself 'par la magie de la rime' [through the magic of rhyme].[9] We can date, therefore, almost exactly the composition of this poem: it is happening as Mallarmé writes this letter, and he presses his friend to hurry as he is afflicted by 'l'impatience "d'un poète en quête d'une rime"' [the impatience 'of a poet in search of a rhyme']. The *Sonnet* is the only poem we know of written in the period following the abandonment of work on *Hérodiade* and during the period when Mallarmé was also working on *Igitur*.[10]

But beyond the date, what is there to link it to the aesthetic concerns of the poet as he delineates his *Œuvre*? I will look at the way in which the *Sonnet* is formed by the demands of the *Œuvre* in more detail below, but at this stage, it would be worthwhile anticipating this reading by making an obvious point that can again be

drawn from the correspondence of the poet; this poem seeks to enact the kind of (Narcissistic) self-reflexivity of the 'Œuvre pure'.

So, by its date and by its concerns the work occupies a highly significant position in Mallarmé's development.

The poem was sent to Cazalis on 18 July 1868 for inclusion in a collection of sonnets to be published with etched illustrations.[11] In the letter that accompanied the *Sonnet*, Mallarmé provides a description of a possible illustration and a few comments on the poem itself. It is here that it is famously described as a 'se réfléchissant de toutes les façons' [reflecting itself in every way]. In the last chapter where I followed Mallarmé's trajectory through the work on *Hérodiade* to the conception of his *Œuvre*, it was seen that the desire to write a work that was not simply beautiful but was beauty in an absolute sense necessarily meant the displacement of a transcendent measure of value and a movement towards immanence. It was argued that *Hérodiade* enacted the drama of this movement and that the narrative of the 'Scène' told the story of a poetics which was leaving behind a theo-logical writing, separating itself from its past ('vie de jeune fille') and the heavy burden of tradition associated with that past (La Nourrice), and announcing the coming of a new poetics ('plumage héraldique'). This movement implied a reflexive turn of the poem on itself, and it was argued in the reading that one level of the narrative, the referential, became, at certain decisive points, inseparable from the reflexive level of the narrative, in which the mirror plays a key structural role as it turns the poem back on itself. Absolute beauty would require a perfectly reflexive work, and it was the extraordinary demand of this narcissism which provoked the crisis of the late 1860s. The referential level of the perfectly narcissistic text would become inseparable from the reflexive level of the narrative to the degree that it would exclude everything external to the text itself; it would 'abolish chance'. It is in the context of this reflexivity that we can begin to read the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*.[12]

1. The 'Sonnet nul'

Sonnet allégorique de lui-même

La nuit approbatrice allume les onyx
De ses ongles au pur Crime lampadophore,
Du Soir aboli par le vespéral Phœnix
De qui la cendre n'a de cinéraire amphore

Sur des consoles, en le noir Salon: nul ptyx,
Insolite vaisseau d'inanité sonore,
Car le Maître est allé puiser l'eau du Styx
Avec tous ses objets dont le rêve s'honore.

Et selon la croisée au nord vacante, un or
Néfaste incite pour son beau cadre une rixe
Faite d'un dieu que croit emporter une nixe

En l'obscurcissement de la glace, Décor
De l'absence, sinon que sur la glace encor
De scintillations le septuor se fixe.

[The approving night lights the onyx
Of its claws by the light bearing pure Crime
Of the Evening abolished by the vesperal Phoenix
Of which the ash has no funerary amphora

On the consoles, in the black Room: null ptyx,
Strange vessel of sonorous inanity,
Because the Master has gone to draw water from the Styx
With all the objects in which dream takes pride.

And through the window to the vacant north, a harmful
Trace of gold encourages a struggle for its handsome frame,
Produced by a god that a nix thought it had beaten

Into the darkening of the mirror, setting
Of absence, except that on the mirror again
In scintillations the septet is fixed][13]

What is an allegory? The *OED* gives the following definition: 'A figurative sentence, discourse or narrative in which properties or circumstances attributed to the apparent subject really refer to the subject they are meant to suggest; an extended or continued metaphor'. The World English Dictionary supplies this etymology: 'from old French *allegorie*, from Latin *allēgoria,* from Greek, from *allēgorein* to speak figuratively, from *allos* other + *agoreuein* to make a speech in public, from *agora* a public gathering'. Allegory is defined, therefore, as an extended metaphor, a manner of speaking in which the apparent subject serves as a vehicle towards an other meaning. The title of this sonnet says, though, that it is allegorical of itself. The movement towards the other is folded back, returned on itself. Its apparent movement away from itself is therefore checked and the direction of referral internalized. It is allegorical, so the narrative of the apparent subject really refers to the subject it is meant to suggest, but the subject it is meant to suggest is 'lui-même'.[14]

In the quotation at the opening of this chapter, Derrida says that 'a work that was purely self-referential would immediately be annulled' — maybe this is what is happening with this sonnet, this 'sonnet nul'.[15] The title suggests that Mallarmé has contrived to write a sonnet in which the referential level of the narrative is confused absolutely with the reflexive level. It would then answer the demand of the Absolute as it was implied in *Hérodiade*. This is what the title suggests. It remains to be seen how this sonnet works. I will begin this reading with the event which sets the scene: the pure 'Crime' of a global annihilation.

1.1. First Quatrain (The Crime)

The first quatrain of the *Sonnet* evokes, then, the solar catastrophe. It is not named as such. Before the opening line of the *Sonnet*, the sunset is a 'fait accompli'. We read in the third line of the 'Soir aboli par le vespéral Phœnix'; the evening ('Soir') has been destroyed in the movement of the descending sun ('vésperal Phœnix'). As the sun went down, however, the stars appeared: 'La nuit approbatrice allume l'onyx | De ses ongles'. It is as though the stars have been ignited by the light of the dying sun. This reading is encouraged because it is said that the 'ongles' are lit up 'au pur Crime lampadophore'. The light of the 'pur Crime' is carried over ('lampadophore

— celui qui portait les lumières dans les cérémonies religieuses' [the light-carrier in religious ceremonies]) to the approving night ('La nuit approbatrice'). What has taken place is a kind of sacred ceremony, the adjective 'vespéral' being overlaid with religious connotations, and the light of the dying sun ('Phœnix') has passed, via the 'lampadophore', to the stars. This may be why the remains of the phoenix are not to be collected in an amphora ('De qui la cendre n'a de cinéraire amphore'). It is a pure crime with no remains — there is nothing left except the stars lit by the passage of the 'Crime'.

But why should the poem open with the evocation of this passage? Why should this passage be called a 'Crime'? And why should this 'Crime' be called 'pur'? These are important questions because the 'pur Crime' is the condition of possibility of this sonnet: although the *Sonnet* does not describe the 'Crime' as such, it is assumed and evoked as the event which opens onto the sonnet 'se réfléchissant de toutes les façons'.

The 'Ouverture ancienne d'Hérodiade', written immediately following the 'Scène', constantly evokes the solar drama. There is confusion throughout the poem as to whether the strange light, 'la rougeur' (rouge heure), is that of a setting or rising sun. This confusion certainly has something to do with the ambiguous nature of Mallarmé's aesthetic project, which seeks on the one hand to leave behind a poetics tied to transcendence (cf. discussion in Chapter 2 of the Nourrice as a figure representing the tradition) and, on the other, to consecrate a new, absolute poetics of immanence. Towards the end of the 'Ouverture' we read:

De crépuscule, non, mais de rouge lever,
Lever du jour dernier qui vient tout achever,
Si triste se débat, que l'on ne sait plus l'heure
La rougeur de ce temps prophétique qui pleure (ll. 88–91)

[No sunset, but the red awakening
Of the last day concluding everything
Struggles so sadly that time disappears,
The redness of apocalypse, whose tears]

But the sunset evoked in the first quatrain of *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* is not a simple metaphor, indicating the end of an affiliation. If it were, it would be of little more than sentimental interest. If the pure work implies, as a poetics of absolute interiority, a perfect auto-reflexivity then it cannot accommodate any reference beyond itself, it cannot accept the contingent and must work towards a purification which will 'abolish' chance.[16] It was in this way that we read Mallarmé's famous statement in the letter of 13 July to Cazalis, where he says: 'après avoir trouvé le Néant, j'ai trouvé le Beau' [after discovering Nothing, I discovered Beauty]. 'Le Néant' is the elimination of everything, and it is this elimination which must be considered as a necessary condition for the production of the 'pure work'. Before the *Sonnet*, then, there is a sunset, and this sunset operates a global annihilation. Everything in the *Sonnet* is calculated to reinforce this evacuation of the world, to construct the 'Décor de l'absence'.

Let us consider for a moment the 'purity' of the crime. The sunset is in a strange position because it is in one (highly ambiguous) sense the only external referent of

the poem (the referent that destroys all referents *except* itself). The *Sonnet* evokes this sunset as the condition of its possibility — it transfers its light to the 'ongles' — but it is not in all rigour internal to the poem itself. And so, as the condition of the *Sonnet*'s possibility, the mechanism of the annihilation that sets the scene for the poem, it is both internal and external to the poem. There is an irreducible trace of the world, an irreducible impurity, an 'outside' of the text, an 'ex-ergue', which constitutes an un-sublatable excess that cannot be annulled in the poem's reflexive structure.[17] But for the *Sonnet* to achieve absolute reflexivity this impurity must be excluded, so the 'crime' is called 'pure'. The 'pur Crime' would be the crime that destroys everything, including the crime itself — an absolute destruction with no remainder — but this is exactly what it cannot achieve.

We begin to catch sight then of the sunset as a closing and opening mechanism: its essential ambiguity. The sunset begins to emerge as the condition of possibility and impossibility of the identity of the self-reflexive (narcissistic) text.[18]

1.2. Second Quatrain (ptyx and the 'Maître')

In the second quatrain the darkness of the scene is again evoked ('le noir Salon'). The cosmic drama has created the void necessary for the work. On the side-table ('console') there is nothing to be found except, perhaps, a 'nul ptyx'; which is, again, strictly speaking, nothing. This word has given rise to a lot of speculation, but there is no need to look for any kind of 'object' here, even an absent one. On the console is a 'nul ptyx' and the *Sonnet* describes this 'non-object' as an 'insolite vaisseau d'inanité sonore'. It is a piece of nothing, a sonorous inanity that is left when all possible referents have disappeared.[19] The 'Maître' has removed all objects from the room, descending to the Styx 'avec tous ses objets dont le rêve s'honore'. It therefore functions as a metonym for the poem itself, the 'sonnet nul'. If there is anything left in the room, on the console, it is just the poem, but as the poem is nothing, 'nul', there is nothing there except this strange, absent, vessel ('nul ptyx'), the strangeness of which is precisely that it refers to nothing but itself.

Ellen Burt says: 'In a sense one can say that the *ptyx* reflects nothing more than itself. It is fully adequate to itself in that its only referent is itself, in that signifier and signified are one and the same, in that what it names is exactly itself'.[20] The 'nul ptyx' operates here a kind of 'mise en abyme' of nothingness: the 'sonnet nul' contains within itself, as a part of it, a little piece of nothing, the only referent of which is the nothingness of the *Sonnet* itself. The Greek meaning of the word 'ptyx' [fold] is therefore extremely felicitous, whether Mallarmé was aware of this or not. The word says nothing but itself, folding back on itself, 'se réfléchissant', in an incessant movement. We will see how this structure of self-referral, exhibited in exemplary fashion by this word, will be seen to be the very thing which, while promising the self-identity of the text, in fact displaces it, preventing it from ever coinciding with itself, from ever being 'fully adequate to itself'.

The 'Maître' is also absent from the scene.[21] He has gone to draw water from the Styx. We saw in the last chapter that the 'synthesis', taking place in the non-temporal time of Midnight, is accomplished through the agency of an 'aptitude', a logical function (Igitur), and not the poet who dies as an individual in this movement

('C'est t'apprendre que je suis maintenant impersonnel, et non plus Stéphane que tu as connu, — mais une aptitude qu'a l'Univers Spirituel à se voir et à se developer, à travers ce qui fut moi'). In 'Crise de vers' we read the following:

> L'œuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés; ils s'allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle trainée de feux sur des pierreries, remplaçant la respiration perceptible en l'ancien souffle lyrique ou la direction personnelle enthousiaste de la phrase.[22]
>
> [The pure work implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who yields the initiative to words, through the clash of their ordered inequalities; they light each other up through reciprocal reflections like a virtual swooping of fire across precious stones, replacing the primacy of the perceptible rhythm of respiration or the classic lyric breath, or the personal feeling driving the sentences]

If the 'Maître' is absent, this is because the pure work implies his disappearance, his quasi-death (his death and resurrection as an 'aptitude') as he descends to the river that separates the earth from the underworld. He has relinquished the initiative to the words themselves. It is in this way that Mallarmé can suggest that a word ('ptyx') is created through 'la magie de la rime'. The meaning of the poem is no longer the personal affair of the poet but is generated in his absence through the internal relationship of the words. In the letter accompanying the *Sonnet* Mallarmé says: 'il est inverse, je veux dire que le sens, s'il en a un (mais je me consolerais du contraire grâce à la dose de poésie qu'il renferme, ce me semble) est évoqué par un mirage interne des mots mêmes' [it is the other way around, I mean the meaning, if there is one (but I would be happy to say the contrary thanks to the dose of poetry it contains, it seems) is evoked by an internal reflection of the words themselves]. The 'dose de poésie' is a measure of the autonomy yielded to the words themselves.[23]

1.3. The Tercets

The tercets begin with the vision, through the north window ('selon la croisée au nord'), of the frame of a mirror, evoked only as the fleeting disappearance of its sumptuous decoration, showing the struggle between a god and a water nymph ('nixe'), into the darkness ('l'obscurcissement') of the mirror. With this disappearance, the setting of absence ('Décor | De l'absence') is complete.

In the last chapter we saw the importance of the mirror for *Hérodiade*. In *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* it is again a highly significant structural element of the text. Without the mirror all of the various referential elements of the *Sonnet* encountered during the reading could not be turned back onto the *Sonnet* itself. The positioning of the mirror in the final tercet is therefore essential to setting up this structure.

It seems as though the god and the 'nixe' have disappeared into the oblivion of the mirror. But it only seems this way (the verb 'croire' already suggests that this disappearance may not be exactly what it seems). In any case, it is this last disappearance that creates the space of absence, and as the frame of the mirror disappears into the mirror itself, all that is left is a 'pure' reflecting surface. Precisely nothing: 'Décor | De l'absence'.

It is worth considering here the end of *Un coup de dés*. The phrase that runs through in smaller capitals evokes a similarly vacated space: 'RIEN N'AURA EU LIEU QUE LE LIEU', an absolute destruction, down to the pulsing absence of everything: the 'Néant' (what Levinas and Blanchot will name the 'il y a', see Chapter 4). In both poems, it is exactly here, where everything has disappeared, that an exception is announced. 'EXCEPTÉ PEUT-ÊTRE' says *Un coup de dés*, 'sinon que...' says *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*. And it is right here that the passage from the 'Néant' to the 'Beau' 'takes place'.[24] In the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* this happens through the agency of the mirror. On this pure reflecting surface ('sur la glace encore'), which is nothing other than the poem itself, the 'sonnet nul' when it has been reduced to a setting of absence, 'De scintillations le septuor se fixe'.[25] Here, then, is the 'coup de théâtre' which consecrates the *Sonnet* as an allegory of itself. 'Le septuor' is the constellation, doubled in the mirror to indicate the fourteen lines of the sonnet we have just read, or visually the seven Xs of the rhymes 'en-x'. Pearson comments on the *septuor*:

> A seven letter word suggesting (because of 'scintillations', not Mallarmé's letter to Cazalis) a constellation of seven stars: a constellation reflected so that we have not only the fourteen lines of the sonnet, but the structure of the Petrarchan sonnet itself (a repeated four, a repeated three) and the rhyme scheme (two sevens: /iks/ and /ir/; or two fours: 'yx/ix' and 'ore'; and two threes: 'or' and 'ixe').[26]

2. The 'Nothing-ing of Nothing'

What has just happened? In *Lecture de Mallarmé*, Marchal writes the following:

> De l''inanité sonore' au 'septuor', du poème-réceptacle au poème-foyer, c'est donc le même poème, péjorativement puis emphatiquement mis en abyme, le même poème qui doit effacer toute trace de transitivité entre le monde et lui pour accéder à une auto-réflexivité totale. Le dernier vers renferme ainsi, triomphalement, l'allégorie du poème: le sonnet est allégorique de lui-même jusqu'en cette apothéose stellaire, puisque en une réflexion ultime et totalisante le poème idéalement apparu sur le miroir sous la forme du septuor est en fait le poème déjà écrit; le poème signifié apparait comme le poème signifiant.[27]
>
> [From the sonorous 'inanity' to the 'septuor', from the poem-receptacle to the gathered-poem, it is therefore the same poem, pejoratively then emphatically *mis en abyme*, the same poem that must efface any trace of transitivity between itself and the world to accede to a total auto-reflexivity. The last line thus encloses, in triumph, the allegory of the poem: the sonnet is allegoric of itself up to and including this stellar apotheosis, since, in a final and totalising reflection, the poem which has ideally appeared on the mirror in the form of a septuor is in fact the poem that has already been written; the signified poem appears as the signifier poem]

When Marchal refers to 'une auto-réflexivité totale', he is referring to what we have been calling the perfect narcissism of the *Sonnet*. At a couple of points in the reading above it was indicated, however, that this narcissism might not be as successful as it would appear.

In his reading, Marchal says that with this final apotheosis which is the appearance of the poem itself, in the form of a 'septuor' in the mirror, the signified (signifié) poem appears as the signifier ('signifiant') poem. What does he mean by this, and how can this formulation be related to the reading strategy that I have been employing up until this point?

The *Sonnet* begins, we saw, with the illumination of the stars ('La nuit [...] allume les onyx | De ses ongles'). Having undertaken an initial reading of the poem, we can now say a little more about 'La nuit'. The later version of the *Sonnet* was, according to the *Œuvres complètes*, originally envisaged under the title *La Nuit*, it is therefore legitimate to say that 'La nuit' in the first line refers to the *Sonnet* itself, or, to be more precise, to the pure reflecting surface of the 'sonnet nul': the 'Décor | De l'absence'.[28] The stars, which glimmer in the first lines, emerge on this pure reflecting surface as the very lines of the poem which is here being read; they are accepted by the approving night ('La nuit approbatrice'). In the last lines of the final tercet these stars are 'fixed' in the reflecting surface of the mirror, again, the 'Décor | De l'absence'. It is an 'apothéose stellaire' because it is only with this last consecration that the poem's 'meaning' becomes clear. The stars we see at the beginning have no other referent than themselves — something we can only see through the agency of the mirror, or the poem (as pure reflecting surface) itself. When the last line says 'De scintillations le septuor se fixe', we are sent back to the very beginning of the poem which is recuperated in such a way that any possible movement of reference outside the poem is checked and the stars of the 'septuor' (the seven Xs of the rhyme scheme, etc.), shine with the strange light of self-referral: 'une sensation assez cabalistique'.[29] It is this movement of return on itself that Marchal refers to when he says that 'le poème signifié apparait comme le poème signifiant'. The poem is simply the referent ('signifié') of its own reference ('signifiant'). Marchal says here the same thing as was noted above — that the title *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* implies that the referential level of the narrative is confused absolutely with the reflexive level. The total obliteration of anything external to the poem means that all reference can only be self-reference, the two levels coincide and what the poem signifies is only itself as a signifier: 'insolite vaisseau d'inanité sonore'.

We have already noted a suspicion, however, that the poem has not been able to 'effacer toute trace de transitivité entre le monde et lui', that, in fact, something of an irreducible 'outside' has been carried through to disrupt the self-identity of the *Sonnet*. We might call this the 'double bind' of the 'pur Crime'. In the first place, the *Sonnet* requires the absolute annihilation of the world, the pure holocaust of the pure crime: only by excluding all trace of the outside, by 'abolishing chance', can the *Sonnet* close up on itself, can it 'renferme triomphalement, l'allégorie du poème'. The crime, however, can never be pure, or rather it can only ever be both pure and impure; the *Sonnet* must carry a trace of the annihilation that made it possible, and since that annihilation is of the world, that is, it belongs to the world even as it destroys it, the *Sonnet* is constrained to carry this 'outside' 'within'. The 'pur Crime' can never be simply what it claims to be, its purity is the index of a desire which cannot be realized, that is disrupted in the very movement of its realization.

This desire is the desire for an absolute identity, the pure presence to itself of meaning (the *now* of midnight uncontaminated by past or future). In the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*, what is laid bare is that the poetic Absolute can never achieve the necessary purity which would allow it to attain this absolute presence to itself or identity. The 'pur Crime' if it were 'pur' would imply the annihilation of the work itself, its annulment, as it closes on itself in perfect reflexivity. It is this impossible completion that is staged in the *Sonnet*, driven as it is by the promise of its own destruction. In the next chapter, we will see how this desire is contemplated by Blanchot as the desire of the first night ('la première nuit').[30]

Let us look again at the last line of the *Sonnet*, the one of which Marchal says that it: 'renferme [...] triomphalement, l'allégorie du poème'. We have seen in the foregoing analysis that when we read 'le septuor se fixe', the poem is consecrated as an allegory of itself. Marchal's reading is hardly contestable on this score. But this attempt to write a 'sonnet nul', a sonnet which annuls itself through its own perfect reflexivity, cannot have worked. Mallarmé's last poem tells us as much: 'UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS QUAND BIEN MÊME LANCÉ DANS DES CIRCONSTANCES ÉTERNELLES [...] N'ABOLIRA LE HASARD' [A THROW OF THE DICE WILL NEVER EVEN WHEN LAUNCHED IN ETERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES ABOLISH CHANCE]. Even if the requisite purity seems to have been achieved ('quand bien même lancé dans des circonstances éternelles'), chance cannot be excluded.[31] The aleatory is irreducibly at work in the game of writing.

In 'Psyché: Inventions de l'autre', an essay which is the text of two conferences papers given in 1984 and 1986, in the course of a reading of *Fable* by Francis Ponge, Derrida gives an indication of how we might re-read the 'apothéose stellaire' of *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*.[32]

An initial question: what is the status of the pronouncement at the end of the *Sonnet*? A first answer might be, if we refer to the categories of speech act theory elaborated by J.L. Austin, that it is a 'constative' statement.[33] In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin gives the minimal definition of such a speech act as a true or false statement.[34] In 'Signature événement contexte', Derrida cites the definition given by the French translator of Austin's work: 'l'énonciation *constative* (c'est-à-dire l' "affirmation" classique, conçue la plupart du temps comme une "description" vraie ou fausse des faits)' [the *constative* utterance (that is the classical 'assertion' most often conceived as a true or false 'description' of the facts)].[35] 'Le septuor se fixe' seems, then, to be readily comprehensible as this kind of statement. The poem, in its final line, describes a state of affairs which is either true or false. But can this category of utterance account fully for the 'function' of the last line of the *Sonnet*? At certain points in the analysis above, I said that the last line 'consecrates' the *Sonnet* as a self-reflexive work. This verb suggested itself firstly on account of the 'religious' connotations at the opening of the poem, but also because the statement, 'le septuor se fixe', on a particular level of reading, has an unavoidable 'performative' dimension. A 'performative' utterance, as used by Austin is defined by his French translator, again cited in 'Signature événement contexte', in the following way: '*performative* c'est-à-dire celle qui nous permet de faire quelque chose par la parole elle-même' [*performative*, that is the utterance which allows us to do

something by means of speech itself].[36] This sentence, then, carries out an action. Something is achieved through it: the establishment of the poem as a self-reflexive unity. As the *Sonnet* conflates the two levels of narrative, referential and reflexive, it becomes impossible to decide what kind of utterance ‘le septuor se fixe’ is. It is both constative and performative, and therefore strictly neither one nor the other. Reference to Derrida’s reading of Ponge will allow us to see what is at stake in this confusion or undecidability.

Fable is a short text of seven lines in italics and a kind of post-face of two lines in roman text. It begins with the words: ‘*Par le mot* par *commence donc ce texte*’ [*With the word* with *begins then this text*]. It is, Derrida says, a ‘un mythe d’origine impossible’ [a myth of impossible origin]. The interest of this text for Derrida is the way in which it deconstructs the opposition of the ‘constative’ and ‘performative’. In his reading given in *Roger Laporte*: *The Orphic Text,* Maclachlan summarizes as follows:

> Derrida notes that the self-reference of the opening line describes its own inaugural performance, it is at once constative and performative, and in referring to itself and nothing else, is at once language and metalanguage, and neither [...]. These simultaneities inscribe a division within the self-reference of the line: referring to itself, saying what it does, it refers to itself otherwise in the constatation of its own performance, articulated and divided, we might say, by the minimal *différance* which is the time of reading.[37]

With the word ‘par’, the text begins the enactment of its own beginning, but its first statement, its first ‘descriptive’ (constative) statement states this inaugural performance. This constative statement is also, however, the performance of its own beginning:

> Le constat est le performatif même puisqu’il ne constate rien qui lui soit antérieur ou étranger. Il performe en constatant, en effectuant le constat — et rien d’autre. Rapport à soi très singulier, réflexion qui produit le soi de l’auto-réflexion en produisant l’événement par le geste même qui le raconte.[38]
>
> [The constative statement is the performative itself, since it points out nothing that is prior or foreign to itself. Its performance consists in the ‘constation’ of the constative — and nothing else. A quite unique relation to itself, a reflection that produces the self of self-reflection by producing the event in the very act of recounting it][39]

We move from one to the other in an ‘oscillation infiniment rapide’. This oscillation has a strange effect when we come to consider the word ‘par’. Its second occurrence in the text seems to be a citation of its first occurrence; Derrida notes that the typology of the word indicates that it is a quotation. That is to say, the ‘par’ of the constative statement seems to quote the ‘*par*’ of the performative statement. But as, on the level of the statement as a whole, the ‘constat est le performatif même’, the ‘par’ of the constative statement does not simply cite the performative ‘*par*’. The first ‘par’ belongs to the phrase in which it will be cited and in which, therefore, it will cite itself. As there is no event being referred to, except the linguistic event, here recounted as it produces itself, this event takes place through its own citation: ‘Rapport à soi très singulier, réflexion qui produit le soi de l’auto-réflexion en produisant l’événement par le geste même qui le raconte’. It never takes place for a first time, and this is why it is a ‘mythe d’origine impossible’.

Looking again at the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*, we are presented with a similarly complicated structure of self-reference. The last line says: 'le septuor se fixe'. On the one hand, as we saw above, this is a simple 'constative' statement, but on the other, and immediately, it 'performs' the consecration of the poem as a self-referential work. We could here re-cite the quotation above from *Psyché*, it is appropriate in its totality. The constative *is* the performative. The line does these two things at once: 'Une circulation infiniment rapide [...] Celui-ci est ce qu'il est, un texte, ce texte-ci, en tant qu'il fait passer *dans l'instant* la valeur performative du côté de la valeur constative et inversement' [An infinitely rapid circulation [...] This text is what it is, a text, this text here, inasmuch as — *instantaneously* — it transfers the performative into the constative, and vice versa] (p. 12).

We saw above how the 'septuor' (when it is doubled in the mirror) can refer to the fourteen lines of the *Sonnet*, or visually to the seven Xs of the rhymes 'en –x'. The constellation with seven stars is the Plough (the 'tail' section of Ursa Major); this is further verified in the poem because the window is to the north.[40] The constellation has four stars in the plough end and three in the handle. A distribution echoed in the *Sonnet* where four of each of the line endings (masculine -x and feminine -re) are found in the quatrains and three in the tercets (feminine '-xe' and masculine '-or'). The distribution of the Xs through the poem is the same, four in the quatrains and three in the tercets. When the last X is laid down in the last word of the poem, it visually completes the constellation, providing the last of the stars and fixing the 'septuor'. At the same time as it 'describes' a state of affairs, the 'se fixe' provides the final element, the missing star (X) of the *Sonnet* it 'describes'. The 'se fixe' oscillates at infinite speed between these two textual functions.

Strangely, in this stellar apotheosis, it is also the word 'septuor' which is fixed in the *Sonnet*. It is a seven-letter word and therefore a group of seven (a 'septuor') itself. In the mirror of the poem the 'septuor' discovers itself as self-reference; it re-marks itself in the moment of its inscription in a sentence which is irreducibly both constative and performative. The 'septuor' begins to flicker in the strange light of its own self-reference. On the one hand, on the referential level, it refers to the *Sonnet*, and on the other, the reflexive level, it refers to itself, but the absolute confusion of these two levels, divides the word in the moment of its inscription. Because we can never stop the oscillation of reference and self-reference, we can never be sure about the 'first time' of the word. It 'begins' in the play of re-citation, and the word's meaning is absolutely undecidable.

And what about the 'nothing' word which, it was noted, is an exemplary word serving as a metonym for the 'sonnet nul' itself: the 'ptyx'?

The 'ptyx' is included in the poem as signifier which is at once absolutely empty and absolutely full. Because it is cut loose from any referent (an 'Insolite vaisseau d'inanité sonore') the word should not refer beyond itself. Reducing completely the difference between signifier and signified it should operate as an instance of pure, self-identical meaning, and because it does not mean any thing, it does not mean anything; it is a 'nul ptyx' in the same way and for the same reasons that the *Sonnet* is a 'sonnet nul'. But even in the highly controlled context of the *Sonnet*, it cannot extract itself from the process of meaning generation.

In the initial reading of the poem given above, the 'ptyx' was seen to function as a metonym for the 'sonnet nul'. It is an exemplary moment of the text because it is a word with no reference except itself. But, because of this, the 'ptyx' is not quite nothing. At the absolute minimum it still functions as an example of nothing, and this is why it can be considered a metonym for the *Sonnet*. Even if we allow that the 'ptyx' has no referent, if it does not mean anything outside of the context of the *Sonnet* (as Mallarmé would have liked), then this minimum function cannot be excluded, it is still, through its status as a mark (grapheme), involved in the process of meaning generation. To return to the quotation with which I opened this chapter, we can say that the 'purely self-referential' work cannot annul itself; there is still the 'experience of the nothing-ing of nothing'. Pure self-identity would be the accomplishment of truth in the poetic Absolute. It would be this accomplishment on condition of the destruction of the *Sonnet* itself, as the poetic work enacts the self-transcendence of art in its own sphere, and arrives at a beauty which is equivalent to nothing ('le Néant'). What Mallarmé discovers here, however, is the irreducibility of externality or chance.

This is the reason why the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* has emerged as an unavoidable reference. This poem stages, in exemplary fashion, the annulment of the work in its self-reference, but it also demonstrates the impossibility of achieving the desired closure. The word 'ptyx' cannot simply say nothing because it is constrained, in the same movement, to 'say-itself-saying-nothing': the mark (grapheme) 'ptyx' re-marks itself as a word saying nothing, as it says nothing. There is no poetic Absolute because there can be no meaning which is self-identical and independent from the moment of its inscription. The movement of signification cannot be reduced. There is no poetics of pure interiority because it cannot be expressed except via the detour of exteriority, which will always introduce a measure of contingency.

Nothing nothings. Chance cannot be mastered, but this is not through some failure of the poet. Chance has not been mastered where it should have been. So the Master is all at sea, sinking with the wreckage of his craft.

3. The End of Art

At the end of this chapter I will look at the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* in terms of the broader trajectory being traced here. In the first two chapters I was interested in the way in which Mallarmé came to his conception of the Absolute through his work on *Hérodiade*. At the highest stage of art-historical development, the work effects a transition from a poetics in which value (beauty) is referred to a measure external to the poem, or transcendent, to a poetics in which beauty is 'for itself' ('pour moi, pour moi' says *Hérodiade*). This new poetics implied a self-reflexivity which was evident in *Hérodiade* and which, as we have seen in the course of this chapter, is staged in *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*. Why, then, does the demand of the Absolute lead to this reflexivity? We can answer this question by looking again at the decisive passage of Marchal's reading of *Ses purs ongles très haut...*:

> le sonnet est allégorique de lui-même jusqu'en cette apothéose stellaire, puisque en une réflexion ultime et totalisante le poème idéalement apparu sur le miroir

> sous la forme du septuor est en fait le poème déjà écrit; le poème signifié apparait comme le poème signifiant.[41]
>
> [the sonnet is allegoric of itself up to and including this stellar apotheosis, since, in a final and totalizing reflection, the poem which has ideally appeared on the mirror in the form of a septuor is in fact the poem that has already been written; the signified poem appears as the signifier poem]

So what happens at the moment of the stellar apotheosis? We have already noted that the constellation thus achieved results from the synthesis restaged in the tale of *Igitur* (cf. note 24 above). This passage through which the 'septuor se fixe' is nothing other than the passage to the Absolute as it has been conceived in Mallarmé's work. Marchal says that this apparition of the 'septuor' in the mirror leads to the logical conclusion that the signified poem coincides with the signifier poem. The Absolute would be the coincidence of signifier and signified: the presence to itself of meaning through the absolute reduction of signification. We encountered the same conclusion in the citation from Burt's discussion of the 'ptyx', which, it was said, stands as a metonym for the poem as a whole: 'It is fully adequate to itself in that its only referent is itself, in that signifier and signified are one and the same, in that what it names is exactly itself'.[42]

This identity is, for the Mallarmé of *Igitur*, the ultimate horizon of the work of art, the achievement of which is the task he is charged with accomplishing. We read there, for example: '*Un coup de dés qui accomplit une prédiction, d'où a dépendu la vie d'une race*' [*A throw of the dice which fulfils a prediction, on which has depended the life of a people*].[43] In a paragraph just before, Mallarmé writes:

> Tout ce qu'il en est, c'est que sa race a été pure: qu'elle a enlevé à l'Absolu sa pureté, pour l'être, et n'en laisser qu'une Idée elle-même aboutissant à la Nécessité: et que quant à l'Acte, il est parfaitement absurde sauf que mouvement (personnel) rendu à l'Infini: mais que l'Infini est enfin *fixé*.[44]
>
> [All there is, is that his people has been pure: that it has raised its purity to the Absolute, in order that it be, leaving nothing of this but an Idea itself arriving at Necessity: and that regarding the Act, it is perfectly absurd except as (personal) movement returned to the Infinite: but that the Infinite is finally *fixed*]

The 'Act' which is the achievement of the synthesis in a poetic work (referred to in the previous quotation as *Un coup de dés*) is the act of purification which 'fixes' the infinite. The seeming paradox that the infinite can be '*fixé*' is cleared up if we remember that Hegel had made a distinction between the 'true' infinite and the 'false' infinite.[45] The infinite can be fixed in as much as the poetic work is perfectly adequate to its idea — it is united with its concept. Mallarmé was very well aware of what is at stake when we talk, with Hegel, of something's concept. In 'Notes sur le langage' he says: 'Le moment de la Notion d'un objet est donc le moment de la réflexion de son présent pur en lui-même ou sa pureté présente' [The moment of the Concept of an object is therefore the moment of the reflection of its pure present into itself or its present purity].[46] The poetic Absolute, 'fixed' through the act of synthesis (or the reflexive turn of the 'sonnet nul' — 'le septuor se *fixe*'), reflects the work into its pure (self) presence. The reflexivity of the work is simply the mechanism through which this return to self in presence is

effected. This pure presence of the work is the ultimate horizon of the artwork, and because the artwork, as such, is metaphysical through and through, because it belongs to the history of the West, we have to say that the passion we read in all of Mallarmé's texts which return again and again to this notion of purity is, in itself, a metaphysical passion.[47]

Mallarmé's achievement is, however, ambiguous. It is this ambiguity which makes him uniquely interesting to both Blanchot and Derrida. In the reading given above, I argued that the 'pur Crime' of the *Sonnet* was compromised in its purity. It is not that Mallarmé failed where he could have succeeded — the impurity of the 'pur Crime' appeared rather as an essential impurity. The crime could not be pure without an annihilation that destroys everything, including all trace of the crime itself. But something must remain of this crime — the 'inside', the presence to itself of meaning in the poem, is unsettled by the trace of the 'outside', the pure/impure condition of its possibility. The narcissistic reflexivity of the pure work ('l'œuvre pure') fails in its very accomplishment. The work of art, opened in this way by its outside as it encounters the impossibility of pure presence, is no longer strictly speaking a work of art. If the artwork has been produced within a horizon of truth as self-presence, then a work which encountered the impossibility of achieving this purity would no longer belong to the history of art.[48] With this encounter we enter what Blanchot calls the 'l'espace littéraire'.

Notes to Chapter 3

1. *CLP*, pp. 348–49 (letter to Lefébure, 27 May 1867).
2. Jacques Derrida, '"That Strange Institution Called Literature": An interview with Jacques Derrida', in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 47.
3. The 'book' is an extremely important notion, for both Blanchot and Derrida, which we have already encountered, and which I will examine in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5. The 'book' is produced under the constraints of a metaphysical paradigm that has dominated/constituted the history of the West. We saw in the introduction how, in Blanchot's short 'Note' at the beginning of *L'Entretien infini*, he explicitly uses the name Mallarmé to designate a movement beyond the concept of the 'book' and towards the experience of something he calls 'littérature'.
4. *OC*, p. 522. See also on this subject 'Crise de vers', in *OC*, p. 366 and passim. For Davies's interpretation see the introduction to *Mallarmé et le drame solaire*, and 'Mallarmé's commitment to "Transposition"' in *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 26 (January-April, 1989), 52–70.
5. See, for example, the first words of Marchal's reading of the later published version *Ses purs ongles très haut...* in *Lecture de Mallarmé*: 'Du nouveau sur le sonnet en –ix? Sûrement pas...' [Again on the sonnet en-yx? Surely not...], p. 165. Marchal provides here an extensive list of commentaries up until the publication of his book in 1985. At the beginning of Roger Pearson's reading of the sonnet in *Unfolding Mallarmé* (1996), he supplements this list with more recent publications (p. 139).
6. We have already Blanchot's commentary on this movement that takes the name of 'Mallarmé'. For a similar evocation in Derrida's work, see 'La Double Séance', in *La Dissémination*, p. 255, where he speaks of a 'déplacement que nous nommons ici par convention "mallarméen"' [displacement we name here by convention 'Mallarmean'].
7. It is in part because of its date of composition that I am focusing my attention on this early version of the sonnet which was not published during the lifetime of the poet, rather than *Ses purs ongles très haut...*, the later revised version, which appeared in *Poésies* in 1887. In *Unfolding Mallarmé* Pearson notes: 'Almost always [...] attention has focussed on the 1887 version ('Ses purs ongles...'), while "Sonnet allégorique de lui-même" (1868) has tended to be passed over

as the less accomplished version of a hermetic masterpiece [...] only one commentary has been dedicated to "Sonnet allégorique de lui-même"' (p. 139).

8. It is, an editorial note assures us: '[Le] premier poème écrit par Mallarmé après la crise d'*Hérodiade*' [the first poem written by Mallarmé after the crisis of *Hérodiade*] (*CLP*, p. 393).
9. *CLP*, p. 386 (letter dated 3 May 1868). This is the same letter, mentioned in the last chapter, in which Mallarmé speaks of a two-year frequentation of the Absolute since his stay in Cannes.
10. In Bonniot's preface he dates the composition of *Igitur* between 1867 and 1870 (*OC*, p. 426).
11. The collection was published by Lemerre in 1869 without a contribution from Mallarmé; the correspondence concerning this omission can be read in *OC*, p. 1489.
12. The editorial note attached to the letter of 18 July says that it is: 'l'illustration parfaite d'une poésie désormais consciente d'elle-même qui consacre l'immanence du sens' [the perfect illustration of a poetry now conscious of itself which consecrates the immanence of meaning].
13. In my translation I have made no attempt to respect the rhyme scheme or the metre. The reading given in this chapter is of the French work and the translation is provided for the convenience of the reader only.
14. 'Oui, c'est pour moi, pour moi, que je fleuris, déserte!' (l. 86) [Yes, it is for me, for me, that deserted I bloom] says Hérodiade.
15. 'J'ai pris ce sujet d'un sonnet nul et se réfléchissant de toutes les façons' [I took this subject of a null sonnet reflecting itself in every way] (*CLP*, p. 392).
16. There is an interesting parallel here with Hegel's *Aesthetics*, which was, as noted above, already available in a French edition. In volume 1, chapter 3, 'The Beauty of Art or the Ideal', Hegel writes: 'Now since art brings back into this harmony with its true Concept what is contaminated in other existents by chance and externality, it casts aside everything in appearance which does not correspond with the Concept and only by this purification does it produce the Ideal' (p. 155).
17. In this sense it resembles, structurally, the *pre*-face as it is analyzed by Derrida in 'Hors livre', in *Dissémination*: 'On a toujours écrit les préfaces, semble-t-il... en vue de leur propre effacement. Parvenu à la limite du *pré* (qui présente et précède, ou plutôt devance la production présentative et, pour mettre devant les yeux ce qui n'est pas encore visible, doit parler, prédire et prédiquer), le trajet doit en son terme s'annuler. Mais cette soustraction laisse une marque d'effacement, un *reste* qui s'ajoute au texte subséquent et ne s'y laisse plus tout à fait résumer' [We have always written prefaces, it seems, with a view to their erasure. Having arrived at the limit of the *pre* (which presents and precedes, or rather pre-empts the presentative production and, to show what is not yet visible, must speak, predict and predicate), the passage must ultimately annul itself. But this subtraction leaves a mark of erasure, a *remains* which is added to the subsequent text and does not quite allow itself to be incorporated] (p. 15).
18. This ambiguity will be significant in the next chapter, where I will be looking at Mallarmé's importance for Blanchot as he distinguishes 'the night' and the '*other* night' in *L'Espace littéraire*.
19. Bertrand Marchal writes: 'En tout cas, ce mot vide, qui témoigne d'une structure formelle nécessaire construite sur le ruine de toute représentation extérieure, est la limite du désir mallarméen, tel qu'il se manifeste dans le sonnet en –ix, d'une création verbale pure, désencombrée d'objets, qui renvoie à l'absence de toute réalité' [In any case, this empty word — which bears witness to a necessary formal structure built on the ruin of any exterior presentation — is the limit of Mallarméan desire, such as it is manifested in the sonnet en-yx, for a purely verbal creation, clear of objects, which refers to the absence of all reality] (*Lecture de Mallarmé*, p. 180).
20. See Ellen Burt 'Mallarmé's "Sonnet en yx": The Ambiguities of Speculation', *Yale French Studies*, 54 (1977), 69–73. As I go on in this reading, I will try to show why this structure of self-referral does not mean that the 'ptyx' is 'fully adequate to itself', that in fact what it reveals is the non-coincidence with itself of the graphic mark.
21. I would take this opportunity to indicate two errors of transcription in the notes of the first edition of the *Œuvres complètes* which could give rise to certain confusions. Both of them are in the reproduction of the letter accompanying the sonnet which Mallarmé sent to Cazalis. The first is in the description of a possible etching to accompany the poem in the Lemerre edition.

The notes have 'une chambre avec une personne dedans'; in both editions of the correspondence I have consulted this line reads 'une chambre avec personne dedans', a significant difference given the reading of the poem here underway. In Ellen Burt's reading of the 'Sonnet en *yx*', this error does, in fact, give rise to interpretative difficulties (cf. p. 59). The second error gives the sentence: 'J'ai pris ce sujet d'un sonnet nu' instead of 'J'ai pris ce sujet d'un sonnet nul'. The use of the adjective 'nu' is suggestive in terms of Mallarmé's concerns (cf. the discussion of 'nudité' in the last chapter), which makes the error all the more serious. Both of these errors are corrected when the same letter is cited by the editor in the notes of the 1998 edition of the *OC*.

22. *OC*, p. 366. Translation taken from *Divagations*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), p. 208 (slightly modified).
23. The absence of the poet from his work is discussed in the letter of 27 May 1867to Levébure (*CLP*, p. 350): 'Car tout cela n'a pas été trouvé par le développement normal de mes facultés, mais par la voie pécheresse et hâtive, satanique et *facile*, de la Destruction de moi, produisant non la force, mais une sensibilité qui, fatalement, m'a conduit là. Je n'ai, personnellement, aucun mérite, et c'est même pour éviter le remords (d'avoir désobéi à la lenteur des lois naturelles) que j'aime à me réfugier dans l'impersonnalité — qui me semble une consécration' [Because all this has not been discovered through the normal development of my faculties, but by the hasty and sinful, satanic and *simple*, path of Destruction of self, producing not a power but a sensibility which, fatefully, led me there. Personally I take no credit, and it is even so as to avoid the regret (of having disobeyed the slower rhythm of natural laws) that I like to shelter in impersonality — which seems to me a consecration]. In this quotation, we again find the association of the passage to a new poetics with the notion of sin. The 'Destruction' necessary for the pure work is a crime. The passage to impersonality is a consecration, which accords with the religious atmosphere at the beginning of the *Sonnet*.
24. In both cases, the constellation in which the words 's'allument de reflets réciproques' [light up through reciprocal reflection] is set up through the agency of a logical function, an exception announced in the space of the 'Néant'. Inasmuch as this logical function 'achieves' the synthesis of the work, it coordinates with the function of the *Igitur* as it was analysed in the previous chapter. I will investigate these analogical instances in the reading of *Un coup de dés* in Chapter 5.
25. See discussion above of the 'purity' of the mirror encountered in *Igitur* ('Le Minuit' in the last chapter).
26. *Unfolding Mallarmé*, p. 154.
27. *Lecture de Mallarmé*, p. 186.
28. When the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* was reproduced in the 1998 edition of the *OC*, a number of errors of transcription where rectified. Significantly, the 'n' of La Nuit was capitalized, an amendment which serves to emphasize the coincidence of the reflexive and referentrial levels of the text (see below), as the reference for 'La Nuit' is nothing other than the sonnet which begins, therefore, by citing its own 'title'. Other amendments are: the insertion of a comma in the second line before 'lampadophore'; the addition of 'de' in l. 3 of the second quatrain which now reads 'puiser de l'eau du Styx', and can be read as a full alexandrine; the capitalization of the 'r' of Rêve in the last line of the second quatrain; the capitalization of the 'n' of Nord in the first line of the first tercet; the decapitalization of the 'D' in décor in the first line of the second tercet.
29. Mallarmé's letter to Cazalis: 'En se laissant aller à le murmurer plusieurs fois on éprouve une sensation assez cabalistique' [If you permit yourself to murmur is several times you experience a pretty cabalic sensation] (*OC*, p. 1489).
30. See especially 'La piège de la nuit', in *L'Espace littéraire*.
31. See discussion above (Chapter 2, part 2, '1866 — Conception of the *Œuvre*') on the association of the pure work with the eternal.
32. Jacques Derrida, *Psyché: inventions de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987–1998)..
33. See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962).
34. See 'Lecture 1'.
35. 'Signature événement contexte', in *Marges de la philosophie*.
36. Austin offers this basic definition: 'I propose to call it a *performative sentence* or a performative

utterance, or, for short, 'a performative'... The name is derived, of course, from 'perform', the usual verb with the noun 'action': it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action — it is not normally thought of as just saying something' (*How to Do things with Words*, p. 7).

37. Ian Maclachlan, *Roger Laporte: The Orphic Text* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), p. 126.
38. Derrida, *Psyché*, p. 24.
39. Derrida, 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other', translated by Catherine Porter in Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 12 (translations occasionally modified).
40. The North Star (Polaris) can be located by imagining a line between two stars of the Plough and extending it.
41. *Lecture de Mallarmé*, p. 186.
42. 'Mallarmé's "Sonnet en yx": The Ambiguities of Speculation', p. 72.
43. *Igitur*, in *OC*, p. 442.
44. Ibid., p. 442.
45. 'Dualism, in putting an insuperable opposition between finite and infinite, fails to note the simple circumstance that the infinite is thereby only one of two, and is reduced to a particular. Such an infinite, which is only a particular, is co-terminous with the finite which makes for it a limit and a barrier: it is not what it ought to be, that is, the infinite, but is only finite', Hegel, *Logic*, part 1 of the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. by William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 139. See also Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. by A.V. Miller (New York: Humanity Books, 1969), especially the section on 'Infinity' in Book 1, Chapter 2: 'This contradiction occurs as a direct result of the circumstance that the finite remains as a determinate being opposed to the infinite, so that there are *two* determinatenesses; *there are* two worlds, one infinite and one finite, and in their relationship the infinite is only the *limit* of the finite and is thus only a determinate infinite, an *infinite which is itself finite*' (pp. 139–40).
46. Mallarmé, 'Notes sur le langage', in *Igitur/Divagations/Un coup de dés*, p. 73 (this work was written, but never published in his lifetime, during the period when Mallarmé was working on *Igitur*).
47. On this subject, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *Les Muses* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), especially section 4 of the chapter entitled 'Le vestige de l'art', which begins: 'Si l'on veut bien être attentive, et peser avec précision les mots et leur histoire, on conviendra qu'il y a une définition de l'art qui englobe toutes les autres (pour l'Occident du moins, mais "art" est un concept de l'Occident)' [If we are really willing to be attentive, and weigh our words carefully along with their history, we will admit that there is one definition of art that encompasses all the others (for the West at least, but 'art' is a Western concept)].
48. See Derrida's remarks at the beginning of 'La Double Séance': 'Entre Platon et Mallarmé [...] une histoire a eu lieu. Cette histoire fut aussi une histoire de la littérature, si l'on admet que la littérature y est née et en est morte, son acte de naissance comme telle, la déclaration de son nom, ayant coïncidé avec sa disparition selon une logique que l'hymen nous aidera à définir. Et cette histoire, si elle a un sens, est tout entière réglée par la valeur de vérité et par un certain rapport, inscrit dans l'hymen en question, *entre* littérature et vérité' [Between Plato and Mallarmé [...] a history has taken place. This history was also the history of literature, if we admit that literature was born and died of it, the act of its birth as such, the declaration of its name, having coincided with its disappearance according to a logic that the hymen will help us to define. And this history, if it has a meaning, is regulated in its entirety by the value of truth and by a certain relation, inscribed in the hymen in question, *between* literature and truth] (p. 225).

CHAPTER 4



L'Espace littéraire

> Quand tout a été dit, quand le monde s'impose comme la vérité du tout, quand l'histoire veut s'accomplir dans l'achèvement du discours, quand l'œuvre n'a plus rien à dire et disparait, c'est alors qu'elle tend à devenir parole de l'œuvre. En l'œuvre disparue, l'œuvre voudrait parler, et l'expérience devient la recherche de l'essence de l'œuvre, l'affirmation de l'art, le souci de l'origine.
>
> [When all has been said, when the world comes into its own as the truth of the whole, when history wants to culminate in the conclusion of discourse — when the work has nothing more to say and disappears — it is then that it tends to become the language of the work. In the work that has disappeared the work wants to speak, and the experience of the work becomes the search for its essence, the affirmation of art, concern for the origin]
>
> Maurice Blanchot[1]

Up until a certain point, Mallarmé's work can be approached in terms of aesthetics. His desire in writing *Hérodiade* is to write a work which is beautiful in an absolute sense.[2] But, in achieving the Absolute in a perfectly reflexive work (the *Sonnet*), there is a radical disruption, and the work's concern is no longer 'aesthetic'. It is this movement or turn that is sketched in the quotation from *L'Espace littéraire* given at the beginning of this chapter. It is precisely with the disappearance of the work (its 'annulment' in the achievement of narcissistic reflexivity) that 'the work wants to speak' — this 'affirmation of art' will take us beyond art, which, in this movement, gives way to something which we may term 'littérature'.[3] It is in this experience of disappearance that the work becomes 'concern for the origin'. This movement is crucial.

In *L'Espace littéraire*, Blanchot refers to this moment of transition in Mallarmé's work as 'le point central', and in the section entitled 'L'Expérience de Mallarmé' he constantly draws attention to the irreducibly ambiguous nature of this point. He writes, for example:

> Il semble que le point où l'œuvre nous conduit n'est pas seulement celui où elle s'accomplit dans l'apothéose de sa disparition, où elle dit le commencement, disant l'être dans la liberté qui l'exclut, — mais c'est aussi le point où elle ne peut jamais nous conduire, parce que c'est toujours déjà celui à partir duquel il n'y a jamais œuvre. (*EL*, p. 49)
>
> [Thus it seems that the point to which the work leads us is not only the one where the work is achieved in the apotheosis of its disappearance — where it announces the beginning, declaring being in the freedom that excludes it — but

> also the point to which the work can never lead us, because this point is always already the one starting from which there is never any work (*SL*, p. 46)]

This central point marks the transition to the 'literary' in Blanchot's work — it is what allows him to structure his criticism around an opposition. Understanding the ambiguity of this central point and Mallarmé's importance here is the motivation for the analyses of the first part of this chapter. I will then draw on these analyses to see how Blanchot considers the movement of 'littérature' to be a transgression of the law of the 'day', and in this way reads Mallarmé's work as a powerful challenge to the totalizing gesture of the Hegelian dialectic. Mallarmé's work will be seen to take on an historical significance.

In the reading of the *Sonnet* given in the last chapter, I drew on the work of Blanchot and Derrida in order to suggest how the calm of the completed work is disrupted in the very movement of its achievement. In this chapter I will deal exclusively with Blanchot's reading of Mallarmé, where we will find this disruption discussed in terms of a turn from the calm of the first night towards the '*other* night' (suggesting an ambiguity in the sunset, the passage into the night). The overall aim of the chapter is to draw on the arguments made up to this point as I look at Blanchot's readings of Mallarmé so as to precisely situate Mallarmé in Blanchot's criticism at the site of passage to the 'literary'. In order to do this I will follow the movement sketched in the above quotation as it can be read in Blanchot's discussions of Mallarmé.[4] I will be looking at how the annulment of the work becomes the search for 'l'essence de l'œuvre'. I will begin to do this by turning to Blanchot's reading of *Igitur* in *L'Espace littéraire*.

1. 'L'Espace nocturne'

> Une négation qui se voudrait absolue, niant tout existant — jusqu'à l'existant qu'est la pensée effectuant cette négation même — ne saurait mettre fin à la "scène" toujours ouverte de l'être, de l'être au sens verbal: être anonyme qu'aucun être ne revendique, être sans étants ou sans êtres, incessant "remue-ménage" pour reprendre une métaphore de Blanchot, *il y a* impersonnel, comme un "il pleut" ou un "il fait nuit".[5]
>
> [A negation which would be absolute, negating every existent — including the existent that is the thought effecting this negation itself — would not be able to put a stop to the always open 'scene' of being, being in the verbal sense: anonymous being claimed by no being, being without beings or Beings, incessant 'agitation' to use one of Blanchot's metaphors, an impersonal *there is*, like 'it's raining' or 'it's night']

1.1. Igitur: Two Deaths/Two Nights

Igitur became a specific focus in Chapter 2, part 3. At that stage the work was regarded as a tale through the writing of which Mallarmé hoped to overcome his sterility and to begin to write his *Œuvre* as conceived following the crisis inaugurated by *Hérodiade*. The Hegelian connotations were emphasized and *Igitur* was seen as a restaging of the 'synthèse' evoked so often in the *Correspondance*. Earlier in the

chapter we had seen that Mallarmé considered his *Œuvre* to be the final movement in an art-historical schema which mapped quite precisely onto Hegel's from the *Aesthetics*. It is the apotheosis of a spiritual journey which, following the Christian disruption of the Classical ideal, brings that ideal back to itself in self-consciousness. In this sense Mallarmé's work would be the resolution of the problem posed by the Christian intervention. Igitur is the last actor in an historical drama, and the Absolute achieved in the syllogism that his name implies comes at the end of historical time as it is understood in Hegel, that is to say, 'Time [...] as the destiny and necessity of Spirit that is not yet complete within itself'.[6]

It was following the reading of *Igitur* at the end of Chapter 2 that I went on, in Chapter 3, to look at the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* which was seen to belong to the context of the tale both because of the time of its composition (in 1868) and because of the concerns of the poem. The *Sonnet* was the next poem to be written after *Hérodiade* and at the end of the last chapter I began to consider the ways in which it relates to *Igitur*. If, as is very likely, Mallarmé began to write *Igitur* when it is first mentioned in the *Correspondance*, then the tale can be seen to respond directly to the achievement of this highly reflexive work.[7] As I approach Blanchot's reading of *Igitur*, which finds its place right in the heart of *L'Espace littéraire*, the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* will, therefore, be an extremely significant reference. Before I turn to the text of 'L'Expérience d'"Igitur"' it is important, however, to say something of two works which had a marked influence on Blanchot as he composed his text.

Blanchot's analysis of *Igitur* in *L'Espace littéraire* can be understood as the staging of a conversation between *Igitur* and two other texts. The closest both in terms of its date of publication and its immediate subject matter is Georges Poulet's essay on Mallarmé included in his 1952 book *La Distance intérieure*.[8] This essay is cited in two footnotes in Blanchot's book — once in the section entitled 'L'Expérience d'"Igitur"', and once in an earlier section, 'L'Expérience de Mallarmé'. The earlier reference comes in a footnote which refers the reader forward to the reading of *Igitur* given later in the book. But, Blanchot warns, the experience of *Igitur* cannot properly be discussed until we have arrived at 'un point plus central de l'espace littéraire' [a more central point of the space of literature]. From this comment we get some idea of the importance Blanchot attaches to *Igitur* as he approaches what he calls 'l'espace littéraire'.

For Blanchot, Poulet's essay (particularly his comments on *Igitur*) allows him to formulate what is perhaps the most insistent question of *l'Espace littéraire*: 'Puis-je me donner la mort?' (*EL*, p. 45) [Can I take my own life? (*SL*, p. 45)]. For Poulet, says Blanchot, 'le poème pour Mallarmé dépend d'un rapport profond avec la mort, n'est possible que si la mort est *possible*' [the poem depends upon a profound relation to death, and is possible only if death is *possible*]. But this possibility of dying, this ultimate possibility, is profoundly problematic. Can I actually die? asks Blanchot. Is the moment of my death not infinitely deferred precisely because death destroys the consciousness which would be able to take hold of that death and make of it *my* possibility? Poulet's reading considers *Igitur* to be 'un exemple parfait du suicide philosophique' [a perfect example of philosophic suicide], but Blanchot discovers

in this tale a displacement of the closure that this death seems to herald. On this same limit, Blanchot discovers death not as possibility but a 'renversement radical' [radical reversal], to cite a section heading from the last chapter of the book: death as the impossibility of dying.[9]

This impossibility brings us to the second text in the conversation, Emanuel Levinas's *De l'existence à l'existant*. This text is not quoted in *L'Espace littéraire* but it is mentioned in two footnotes in 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', one of Blanchot's readings of Mallarmé in *La Part du feu*.[10] In a key section of his book entitled 'Existence sans existant', Levinas considers what he terms the *il y a*, the raw existence that remains when every existent has been negated. It is, he says, 'comme une densité du vide, comme un murmure du silence' [like a density of emptiness, like a murmur of silence] (p. 104). Horror comes, says Levinas, from 'la participation à l'*il y a*. A l'*il y a* qui retourne au sein de toute négation, à l'*il y a* "sans issue". C'est, si l'on peut dire, l'impossibilité de la mort' [participation in the *there is*. The *there is* that returns in the heart of every negation, the *there is* 'without exit'. That is, if we may put it like this, the impossibility of death] (p. 100).

If the experience of *Igitur* is central to the concerns of *L'Espace littéraire* then this is because it is through this text that Blanchot can elaborate his theme of 'le renversament radical' in which death is no longer considered as man's ultimate possibility, but is rather an ultimate limit to man's possibilities: what he cannot achieve because he cannot grasp it. If we are to understand the stakes of this reversal and why Mallarmé is such a key figure here, it is necessary to pose a question that has been touched upon in each of the last two chapters but which has not yet been developed as an explicit theme.[11] It is necessary to ask about the relationship between death and the work ('l'œuvre') in Mallarmé's writing. It is in Poulet's essay ('son essai si important') that Blanchot finds the crucial insights that will allow him to structure his approach, so it is to this essay that I will turn first in order to find the correct perspective from which to consider 'L'Expérience d'"Igitur"'.

Poulet's essay poses the Mallarmean problem and gives the Mallarmean solution to that problem. First of all, then, the problem. To begin with, Mallarmé is caught in a kind of Baudelairean trap. There are two worlds: the one here, down below, where the poet is; and the other, the ideal toward which his desire is directed. The early poems published in *Le Parnasse contemporain* are emblematic of this predicament. In *Les Fenêtres*, for example, we find that: 'L'opposition radical entre deux mondes dont l'un, triste hôpital, est le *lieu où l'on est*, et dont l'autre, l'Azur, est le *lieu où l'on n'est pas*, fait le sujet du poème' [The radical opposition between two worlds of which one, the sad hospital, is the *place where we are*, and the other, the Azure, is the *place where we are not*, constitutes the subject of the poem].[12] The window is the transparent element which gives access to this other world but which at the same time blocks that access, and the poet is forced to 'boucher le nez devant l'azur' [hold [his] nose before the azure]. 'Est-il moyen' the poem asks, 'D'enfoncer le cristal'? Is there any way of breaking through to the other side of the glass, to gain access to the azure?[13] The germ of Mallarmé's solution is already present in the poem. In verse 8:

Je me mire et me vois ange! et je meurs, et j'aime
– Que la vitre soit l'art, soit la mysticité —
A renaitre, portant mon rêve en diadème,
Au ciel antérieur où fleurit la Beauté![14]

[In my reflection I see myself an angel! And I die
And I yearn
– That the window were art, were mysticism –
To be reborn bearing my dream for a diadem
In the former sky where Beauty flourished]

In the window the poet sees his reflection and it is as though his face is projected into the azure. On the one hand, this is a kind of agony for the poet who so desperately wants to access the azure, but on the other he catches sight of a strange possibility. If the window-pane is his art, that is, if the poem is a quasi-reflective surface, it is possible that, rather than smashing through the window, it will suffice to re-conceive the ideal, not as something inaccessibly transcendent but as internal to the work itself. It is a daring move that would require a new poetics. This is the movement that we considered in Chapter 2, where Hérodiade blocks out the 'azur' having discovered her 'sœur éternelle' in the depths of the mirror.[15] This change of conception is indicated, for Poulet, by the change of one word from the earliest manuscript version of the work to the published version.

When the poem was published in *Le Parnasse contemporain* in 1866 verse 8 read as it has been quoted above, but this is not, Poulet notes, how it read at the time of its composition in London in 1863. That is to say that at some time in the period between 1863 and 1866, the early period of the 'crisis' reconstructed in Chapter 2, Mallarmé introduced a change which Poulet considers to be of great importance. In an earlier manuscript version of the poem the first line of the verse reads 'Je me mire et me vois ange! et je *songe*, et j'aime'. 'En remplaçant *je songe* par *je meurs*', says Poulet, 'Mallarmé donnera en 1866 une signification absolument nouvelle à son poème' [By replacing *I dream* with *I die*, Mallarmé will give an absolutely new meaning to his poem in 1866].[16] In the earlier version, the desire to break through to the other side of the window remains just that, a desire ('je songe'), but by the time of the later amendment, Mallarmé has discovered a way in which this desire might be realized: it is *death* that will enable the passage from desire to its accomplishment.

When the 'azur' is considered as a beyond to which the poet dreams of acceding, when the two worlds are separated by a divide that cannot be crossed, this is because the poet is trapped in the world here below. It is his own contingency which prevents him from accessing the world of the eternal, the 'azur'. The solution is therefore to die as a man so as to be reborn spiritually. The 'pur Crime' that abolishes the world abolishes in that same movement the man who perpetrates it.[17] If God is a lie, it is because his transcendence perpetuates an unbearable dualism that condemns the poet to live out his existence in the 'triste hôpital' of the here and now. If the poet is to accede to the eternal in the here and now, he must paradoxically turn away from the 'azur'; if he remains in his initial condition, with his eyes fixed on an unobtainable beyond, he will continue to be trapped by a duality he can only dream

of overcoming. But the condition for attaining the eternal in the here and now is the abolition of the contingent (the abolition of the here and now, of space and time), and that means, along with the abolition of the natural world, the abolition of the poet.[18] Performing this negation the poet passes to 'Le Néant', nothingness, and it is on the condition of this nothingness that he can contemplate the absolute beauty he desires. So Poulet quotes three extracts from letters we came across in Chapter 2: 'Je suis mort et ressuscité avec la clef de pierreries de ma dernière cassette spirituelle' [I have died and been resurrected with the bejewelled key to my final spiritual casket] (*CLP*, p. 312, letter to Aubanel, 16 July 1866); 'Après avoir trouvé le Néant, j'ai trouvé le Beau' [After discovering Nothing, I discovered Beauty] (*CLP*, p. 310, letter to Cazalis, 13 July 1866); 'Je suis parfaitement mort, et la région la plus impure où mon Esprit puisse s'aventurer est l'Eternité' [I am perfectly dead, and the most impure region in which my Spirit will venture is Eternity] (*CLP*, p. 342, letter to Cazalis, March 1867).

Death, then, is the solution: 'La mort — la mort spirituelle — [...] est un acte, une opération volontaire par laquelle on se donne une nouvelle existence et par laquelle on donne l'existence même au néant' [Death — spiritual death — [...] is an act, a voluntary operation by which to give oneself a new existence and by which to give existence to nothingness].[19] More precisely, it is a voluntary death or suicide which is required; this is the spiritual act *par excellence*. It is in the pages of *Igitur*, Poulet argues, that Mallarmé stages this act: 'C'est cet acte de mort volontaire que Mallarmé a commis. Il l'a commis dans *Igitur*. Il n'y a pas d'œuvre littéraire où se trouve perpétré plus complètement, plus absolument en pensée, l'acte d'abolition et de fondation de soi' [It is this act of suicide that Mallarmé committed. He committed it in *Igitur*. There is no literary work in which the act of destruction and foundation of self is so completely perpetrated, so absolutely thought through].[20] Everything in the tale happens, says Poulet, in an instant, and that is the instant when the hero takes his life: at midnight. Midnight, we noted in Chapter 2, is 'l'heure de la Synthèse'. If *Igitur*, as it has been suggested, responds to the achievement of the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*, then it is worth briefly revisiting this poem to see how this time which is the time of the death of the poet is evoked there.

At the end of the last chapter, we saw how the infinite is fixed in the stellar apotheosis of the *Sonnet*, and how this accomplishment can be considered the final movement in an art-historical process: 'la Synthèse'. The 'sonnet nul' would abolish chance as it excludes everything contingent to the work itself, referring only to itself in a perfectly narcissistic self-identity. This movement of negation which dispatches the world is inseparable from the death of the poet, and is written into the poem. In the last two lines of the second quatrain we read: 'Car le Maître est allé puiser l'eau du Styx | Avec tous ses objets don't le rêve d'honore.' The death of the Maître, his descent to the Styx, is also the disappearance of all the worldly objects which would previously have been included as (external) references in the poem. This is the double negation of the world and the individual, effected through the 'pur Crime' which opens the *Sonnet*.[21] The space which is the 'Décor de l'absence', or the space of 'Le Néant', crosses with 'le Minuit' which is the time of absence, the absence of time in the suspended moment between times. The abolition of space and time is

the necessary condition of the passage to the true infinite of the Absolute as self-presence. In the later published version of the *Sonnet*, *Ses purs ongles très haut...*, the time of the poem is specifically named as midnight in the second line of the first quatrain: 'L'Angoisse, ce minuit, soutient, lampadophore'. We are now in a position to be more specific about the 'Synthèse' staged in the tale of *Igitur.* The 'Synthèse' is the movement which consecrates the time/space of absence through the double negation of the 'crime' (negating both the world and the individual). It is therefore through the operation of the 'Synthèse' that 'on donne l'existence même au néant'. From the 'azur' of the early works we are plunged into the heart of the night.

In the footnote at the end of the section entitled 'L'Expérience propre de Mallarmé', the first reference to Poulet's essay in *L'Espace littéraire*, Blanchot quotes Poulet's comments on suicide given above. To begin with he affirms that Poulet's reading is, on a certain level, accurate: 'Dans son essai si important, *La Distance intérieure*, Georges Poulet montre qu'*Igitur* est "un exemple parfait du suicide philosophique" ' (*EL*, p. 45) [In his very important essay, *The Interior Distance*, Georges Poulet shows that *Igitur* is 'a perfect example of philosophic suicide' (*SL*, p. 43)]. He immediately raises a concern, however, that Poulet's considerations are not to be taken as the last word on the tale: 'Il faut toutefois prolonger les remarques de Georges Poulet' [We must, however, carry Poulet's remarks further]. If we want to consider Mallarmé's tale in all rigour, then we cannot stop here, we have to go further and wonder if *Igitur* does not, in fact, bear witness to a more troubling experience. '*Igitur*', says Blanchot, 'est un récit abandonné qui témoigne d'une certitude à laquelle le poète n'a pas pu se tenir' [*Igitur* is an abandoned narrative which bears witness to a certitude the poet was unable to maintain]. The poet cannot be sure that the act that the tale relates, the 'suicide philosophique', has in fact been achieved. On one level, the poet feels that the spiritual death has been successful. This success is affirmed in the introductory remarks given in the 'Argument':

> Rien ne restera de vous — L'infini enfin échappé à la famille, qui en a souffert, — vieil espace — pas de hasard. Elle a eu raison de le nier, — sa vie — pour qu'il ait été l'absolu. Ceci devait avoir lieu dans les combinaisons de l'Infini vis-à-vis de l'Absolu. Nécessaire — extrait l'Idée. Folie utile. Un des actes de l'univers vient d'être commis là. Plus rien, restait le souffle, fin de parole et geste unis — souffle la bougie de l'être, par quoi tout a été. Preuve.[22]
>
> [Nothing will remain of you — The Infinite finally escaped from the family, which has suffered from it, — old space — no chance. It was right to deny it — its life — in order that it be the absolute. This had to take place in the combinations of the Infinite face-to-face with the Absolute. The Necessary — extract the Idea. Useful madness. One of the acts of the universe has just been committed there. Nothing left, breath remains, end of word and gesture united — blow out the candle of being, by which everything has been. Proof]

Everything in this quotation suggests that the suicide was both necessary and accomplished. Igitur's life was right to negate him in order that he should achieve the Absolute. The madness was worthwhile ('folie utile'). Blowing out the candle of being provides the proof of this — it is in the accomplishment of the act that the act is justified. This is the point of the story, the Argument. If this is demonstrated

then Mallarmé can move forward, he can overcome his sterility and write the *Œuvre*, the 'œuvre pure'. If *Igitur* tells us anything, however, it is, for Blanchot, that nothing about this act is certain. 'Car il n'est pas sûr que la mort soit un acte, car il se pourrait que le suicide ne fût possible. Puis-je me donner la mort?' (*EL*, p. 45) [For it is not certain that death is an act; it could be that suicide was not possible. Can I take my own life? (*SL*, p. 44)].[23] This is the troubling truth of the tale. The 'argument' fails because instead of finding death to be a possibility the poet finds that he cannot achieve nothingness. At this limit there is a kind of reversal: 'le mouvement qui, dans l'œuvre, est expérience, approche et usage de la mort, n'est pas celui de la possibilité — fût-ce la possibilité du néant — mais l'approche de ce point où l'œuvre est à l'épreuve de l'impossibilité' (*EL*, p. 46) [the movement which, in the work, is the experience of death, the approach to it and its use, is not the movement of possibility — not even of nothingness's possibility — but rather a movement approaching the point at which the work is put to the test by impossibility (*SL*, p. 45)]. This failure of the 'argument' is not a failure on the part of Mallarmé to push things far enough. This is a crucial point and Blanchot makes it in no uncertain terms in a sub-section of 'L'Expérience d'"Igitur"' entitled 'L'Exploration, la purification de l'absence':

> C'est dans l'irréalité même que le poète se heurte à une sourde présence, c'est d'elle qu'il ne peut se défaire, c'est en elle que, dessaisi des êtres, il rencontre le mystère de "ce mot même: *c'est*", *non pas parce que dans l'irréel subsisterait quelque chose, parce que la récusation aurait été insuffisante et le travail de la négation arrêté trop tôt, mais parce que, quand il n'y a rien, c'est le rien qui ne peut plus être nié, qui s'affirme encore, dit le néant comme être,* le désœuvrement de l'être (*EL*, p. 138, my emphasis).

> [It is in unreality itself that the poet encounters the resistance of a muffled presence. It is unreality from which he cannot free himself; it is in unreality that, disengaged from beings, he meets with the mystery of 'those very words: *it is*'. *And this is not because in the unreal something subsists — not because the rejection of real things was insufficient and the work of negation brought to a halt too soon — but because when there is nothing, it is this nothing itself which can no longer be negated. It affirms, keeps on affirming, and it states nothingness as being,* the inertia of being (*SL*, p. 110)]

If we put this quotation next to the one made from Levinas's *De l'existence à l'existant* at the beginning of this section, we notice at once a striking resemblance. Levinas's essay, 'Existence sans existant', included as an integral part of *De l'existence à l'existant*, is, it was noted above, the second text put into conversation in Blanchot's reading of Mallarmé in *L'Espace littéraire*. It is at this point of our discussion that we can turn to Levinas's text and ask in what way Blanchot's reading of Poulet's 'Mallarmé' gets inflected by Levinas's consideration of the *il y a* as that which remains as the presence of absence when everything has been negated.[24]

Levinas's essay begins by imaging the 'retour au néant de tous les êtres' [return to nothing of all beings], and straight away he asks about this 'néant lui-même' [nothing itself]. 'Quelque chose se passe fût-ce la nuit et le silence du néant' [something happens, even if that be night and the silence of nothing], he writes, and immediately we get an idea of the significance of this essay for Blanchot's reading

of Mallarmé. It is this night or silence of 'le néant' that Levinas terms the *il y a*. 'celle qui murmure au fond du néant lui-même nous la fixons par le terme d'*il y a*' [that which murmurs in the depths of nothing itself we speak of with the term *there is*]. Levinas refers to this strange presence of absence as 'l'espace nocturne' — the night is, in a way, the experience of the *il y a*: 'Si le terme d'expérience n'était pas inapplicable à une situation qui est l'exclusion absolue de la lumière, nous pourrions dire que la nuit est l'expérience même de l'*il y a*' [If the word experience was not unsuitable for a situation which is the absolute exclusion of light, we could say that the night is the very experience of the *there is*].[25] The *il y a* is what remains as an insistent presence when the double negation of world and individual has been performed: 'Ce qu'on appelle le moi, est, lui-même, submergé par la nuit, envahi, dépersonnalisé, étouffé par elle. La disparition de toute chose et la disparition du moi, ramènent à ce qui ne peut disparaitre' [What we call the self, is, itself, submerged in the night, overcome, depersonalized, suffocated by it. The disappearance of all things and the disappearance of self, lead back to that which cannot disappear].[26] It is this experience of the night that is, says Blanchot, the true experience of *Igitur*:

> La nuit: c'est ici que s'entend la vraie profondeur d'*Igitur* [...] Si le récit commence par l'épisode de "Minuit", l'évocation de cette pure présence où rien ne subsiste que la subsistance de rien, ce n'est certes pas pour nous donner un beau morceau littéraire ni, comme on l'a dit, pour tendre un décor à l'action [...] Ce "décor" est en réalité le centre du récit dont le vrai héros est Minuit, dont l'action est le flux et le reflux de Minuit. (*EL*, p. 140)
>
> [Night: here is where the true profundity of *Igitur* is to be felt [...] If the narrative begins with the episode called 'Midnight' — with the evocation of that pure presence where nothing but the subsistence of nothing subsists — this is certainly not in order to offer us a choice literary passage, nor is it, as some have claimed, in order to set the scene for the action [...] This 'décor' is in reality the centre of the narration whose true hero is Midnight and whose action is the ebb and flow of Midnight (*SL*, p. 111–12)]

Let us be clear. There are two nights. On the one hand, there is the night which is the accomplishment of the Absolute. This is the night in which death is possible. For convenience we might call this 'Poulet's night'. It is the night when the suicide takes place, and, discovering 'le Néant', the poet discovers the 'Beau'. Here, death is a 'folie utile', a productive madness, and there is 'plus rien', nothing. But then, there is the 'presence' of this nothing. The first words of 'Le Minuit' belie the 'proof' of the argument: 'Certainement subsiste une présence de Minuit. L'heure n'a pas disparu par un miroir' [Certainly a presence of Midnight remains. The hour has not disappeared by a mirror]. Midnight is still present as the very presence of absence. The reflexive turn of the *Sonnet*, 'la Synthèse', has not created the pure space of absence. Time has not been annulled by this return of the work on itself: 'l'heure n'a pas disparu par un miroir'.[27] So there is another night, what Blanchot calls 'l'*autre* nuit'. We can confirm this by referring to the first pages of the chapter entitled 'L'Inspiration' in *L'Espace littéraire*. There we read: 'Dans la nuit, tout a disparu. C'est la première nuit. Là s'approche l'absence, le silence, le repos, la nuit'

(*EL*, p. 213) [In the night, everything has disappeared. This is the first night. Here absence approaches — silence, repose, night (*SL*, p. 163)]. This is the night which we just referred to as Poulet's night; death as possibility. Blanchot continues: 'Mais quand tout a disparu dans la nuit, "tout a disparu" apparait. C'est l'*autre* nuit. La nuit est l'apparition du "tout a disparu"' [But when everything has disappeared in the night, 'everything has disappeared' appears. This is the *other* night. Night is the apparition: 'everything has disappeared']. This is clearly Levinas's night.

This experience of the *other* night is the true experience of *Igitur* and 'l'expérience propre de Mallarmé'. Everything, for Blanchot, turns on this limit.

1.2. 'Littérature': Day and Night

We are still tracing the movement sketched in the opening quotation of this chapter, and we have arrived at the crux of the turn. In the disappearance of the *œuvre* the *œuvre* seeks to speak; in the experience of disappearance, the *œuvre* becomes concerned with itself, or, more precisely it becomes concerned with its own obscure origin. This is no longer a narcissistic reflexivity in which the work finds its identity in self-relation. The concern that the work has with itself is more troubling. In the pages to which Blanchot draws attention as the most important in *L'Espace littéraire*, he will refer to this concern through an interpretation of the myth of Orpheus. I will turn to his interrogation of this myth in the second part of the chapter. In this section, I will look at Blanchot's discussion of language in the 'literary' work. We will see how, from very early on, Mallarmé's writings enable Blanchot to set up an oppositional structure in his criticism, with Mallarmé at the ambiguous centre of this structure.

Blanchot's reassessment of the tale of *Igitur* indicates the possibility of a reading of Mallarmé that departs from the more traditional view of him as an idealist poet, whether that is understood in a Platonic or Hegelian sense. It should immediately be emphasized, however, that this departure is only possible on the basis of a profound Hegelianism. Blanchot confirms this in his reading of *Igitur* when he says in reference to Mallarmé that: 'Son vocabulaire hégélien ne mériterait aucune attention s'il n'était animé par une expérience authentique' (*EL*, p. 137) [His Hegelian vocabulary would merit no attention, were it not animated by an authentic experience (*SL*, p. 109)]. He goes on to clarify that this authentic experience is that of the power of the negative. Through his work on *Hérodiade* and the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*, Mallarmé understands that if he is to write the *Œuvre* in all purity, that is, if he is to banish the contingent and pass to a work that is absolutely necessary, then this requires the accomplishment of a global negation. We are still dealing here with an idealist Mallarmé, the one who, through an unheard of 'Synthèse', will consecrate the space/time of absence demanded by the work. Blanchot outlines the desire of the youthful Mallarmé as follows:

> si *Igitur* disait juste, si la mort est vraie, si elle est un acte véritable, si elle n'est pas un hasard, mais la suprême possibilité, le moment extrême par lequel la négation se fonde et s'accomplit [...] alors l'œuvre qui est liée à la pureté de la négation peut à son tour se lever dans la certitude de ce lointain Orient qui est son origine. (*EL*, p. 138)

> [if *Igitur* were to be right — if death is true, if it is a genuine act, not a random occurrence but the supreme possibility, the extreme moment in which negation is founded and completed [...] then the work which is linked to the purity of negation can in its turn arise in the certainty of that distant Orient which is its origin (*SL*, p. 110)]

Through a kind of circular recuperation, the end of the work guarantees its origin. The Occident brings assurance and certitude to the Orient — *the Sunset is the truth of the Sunrise* — and vice versa. Having accomplished in his work an absolute negation (Occident/Sunset), Mallarmé is struck, however, by the strange quality of the 'rien' that he discovers — a strangeness that will turn into a radical interrogation of the work's origin (Orient/Sunrise). Blanchot comments: 'C'est de toute évidence, de ce *rien* qu'il part, dont il a éprouvé la secrète vitalité, la force mystère dans la méditation et l'accomplissement de la tâche poétique' (*EL*, p. 137) [Quite obviously it is from this *nothing* that he starts. He felt its secret vitality, its force and mystery in his contemplation and accomplishment of the poetic task (*SL*, p. 109)]. The 'rien' which Mallarmé considers in *Igitur* does not offer the repose of the completed work. 'Elle [l'idée] fut troublée un moment par sa propre symétrie' [It [the Idea] was disturbed a moment by its own symmetry], says *Igitur* in what seems to be a reference to the *Sonnet*.[28] The absence of presence comes back as the presence of absence. This ambiguity, the inability of the work to close down on a fully resolved nothing, is the ambiguity that is carried in the very thing which 'performs' the negation: the word.[29] For Blanchot, 'littérature'[30] is the site of an increasingly insistent questioning of this ambiguity.

'Littérature' uses words; this is an extremely obvious thing to say. But whereas everyday language uses words without any reflection on what it is doing, in 'littérature' this transparency is made problematic. If a 'literary' work can be said to have a meaning, this is because the passage towards meaning takes place through the agency of language. But how is this passage to ideality possible? How can meaning come to light? This is the question that Blanchot says 'littérature' poses itself. The essay 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort' in *La Part du feu* is Blanchot's earliest comprehensive formulation of the problem of 'littérature'. Mallarmé is already a key reference.[31]

At the beginning of 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', Blanchot says that: 'la littérature commence au moment où la littérature devient une question' [literature begins at the moment that literature becomes a question]. But what is this moment — where/when does it take place? We can begin to answer this question by turning to Blanchot's discussion of the kind of activity that 'littérature' is. Blanchot starts this discussion by drawing on Kojève's work to give an account of the kind of action through which Hegel's dialectic progresses in the world. This is the kind of activity that negates a given set of circumstances, destroys them, in order that through work they be transformed and create a new situation, transforming in this movement the person who accomplishes it. He gives the example of someone who has the project to warm himself. This project is born of a desire, but this desire can only be realized through the negation of the given situation, transforming the raw material that is there into a stove. In the new situation there is a stove and this will

enable that person to fulfil other desires, making tools and eating, and to develop as a subject in this activity. This is the power of the negative in action. On the face of it, it seems as though the writer acts in a similar way: if words are his material then he creates his work through the negation and transformation of the existing state of language, and the book, as physical object, is created out of trees which must be destroyed in one form to be converted into paper. But, looking more closely at the activity of the writer, Blanchot discovers a power of negation that is at once infinitely greater than, and infinitely inferior to, that of any other kind of activity. The writer negates everything. He negates the whole world so that it can be recreated in his work. But this power of negation is useless in the world because it has no purchase there. Blanchot comments: 'il n'est maître que de tout, il ne possède que l'infini, le fini lui manqué, la limite lui échappe. Or on n'agit pas dans l'infini, on n'accomplit rien dans l'illimité' (*PF*, p. 319) [But he is only master of everything, he possesses only the infinite; he lacks the finite, limit escapes him. Now, one cannot act in the infinite, one cannot accomplish anything in the unlimited (*WF*, p. 316)]. 'Littérature' begins with the realization of this 'global negation'. But while this might have always been the tacit condition for any 'fiction', it is only when an analogous condition is realized in the concrete circumstances of the historical world, and 'littérature' finds itself reflected there, that the 'literary' can become the site of the profound self-interrogation that Blanchot claims it to be. It is in the revolutionary situation, and more precisely the situation of the French Revolution, that 'littérature' comes into its own.[32] So Blanchot writes: 'L'écrivain se reconnait dans la Révolution. Elle l'attire parce qu'elle est le temps où la littérature se fait histoire. Elle est sa vérité' (*PF*, p. 324) [The writer sees himself in the Revolution. It attracts him because it is the time during which literature becomes history. It is his truth (*WF*, p. 321)]. And then:

> La littérature se regarde dans la révolution, elle s'y justifie, et si on l'a appelée *Terreur*, c'est qu'elle a bien pour moment idéal ce moment historique, où 'la vie porte la mort et se maintient dans la mort même' pour obtenir d'elle la possibilité et la vérité de la parole. C'est là la 'question' qui cherche à s'accomplir dans la littérature et qui est son être. (*PF*, p. 324)
>
> [Literature contemplates itself in revolution, it finds its justification in revolution, and if it has been called the Reign of Terror, this is because its ideal is indeed that moment in history, that moment when 'life endures death and maintains itself in it' in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech. This is the 'question' that seeks to pose itself in literature, the 'question' that is its essence (*WF*, p. 321–22)]

If 'littérature' catches sight of itself in the Revolution, this is because the Revolution is a time of general negation. Everything is put into question, the *ancien régime* is dispatched, and it is from a base of nothing that the world is created. 'Littérature' cannot help but be drawn to this moment, and in truth it discovers itself there:

> Moments fabuleux en effet: en eux parle la fable, en eux la parole de la fable se fait action. Qu'ils se tentent l'écrivain, rien plus justifié. L'action révolutionnaire est en tous points analogue à l'action telle que l'incarne la littérature: passage de rien à tout. (*PF*, p. 322)

[These moments are, in fact, fabulous moments: in them fable speaks; in them, the speech of fable becomes action. That the writer should be tempted by them is completely appropriate. Revolutionary action is in every respect analogous to action as embodied in literature: the passage from nothing to everything (*WF*, p. 319)]

From these remarks, we can see how Mallarmé is a revolutionary writer in a profound sense — and from a double perspective. Firstly, from the perspective of the 'Synthèse' as we encountered it in Chapter 2. At that stage, the 'Synthèse' was understood as the historical accomplishment of the Absolute in the pure work. I quoted at length and commented on a letter to Lefébure where Mallarmé describes his *Œuvre* as the third scintillation of beauty on the earth. This letter was of interest because it shadows the art-historical schema presented by Hegel in his *Aesthetics*. The poetic Absolute achieved in Mallarmé's work would coordinate precisely with the historical achievement of the Absolute in Hegel's work. Now, a powerful and influential discourse, cited by Blanchot in 'La littérature et le droit à la mort', laid out in no uncertain terms the significance of the French Revolution for Hegel. In Chapter 5 of Kojève's *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, in a section entitled 'Résumé des six premiers chapitres de la Phénoménologie de l'esprit', he writes:

Le Savoir absolu est devenu — *objectivement* — possible, parce que, dans et par Napoléon, le processus *réel* de l'évolution historique, au cours duquel l'homme a *créé* des Mondes nouveaux et s'est *transformé* en les créant, est arrivé à son terme.[33]

[Absolute Knowledge has become — *objectively* — possible, because, in and by Napoleon, the *actual* process of historic development, during which man has *created* new Worlds and *transformed* himself as he did so, has come to its end]

In this chapter, Kojève explained to a generation of French thinkers how the Revolution, as the resolution of the master/slave dialectic, was the apotheosis of world history, how Napoleon was the last of the world-historical figures, and how Hegel, because he was able to understand the significance of Napoleon, was able to penetrate the meaning of the Revolution as the final act in the realization of absolute knowledge in the world.[34]

Mallarmé's work, as the site of a 'Synthèse' which fixes the infinite and accomplishes the final movement in the art-historical schema, would belong to the revolutionary moment because (coming as it does nearly a century after the Revolution) it has been made possible by that Revolution. If absolute knowledge has only become objectively possible because the historical process through which it is realized in the world has come to its term in Napoleon, the last of the world-historical figures, then the same must be said for the poetic Absolute. The artwork can only accomplish the passage to the Absolute because the Revolution has taken place. It is only because the concrete conditions of the Absolute have been realized in world history that the poet can come to enact his 'Synthèse' and make the extraordinary claims for his *Œuvre* that we encountered in Chapter 2. If we follow the logic of Hegel's claims about the Revolution as laid out in Chapter 5 of Kojève's book then we have to say that Mallarmé's work is essentially bound to the Revolution — it is bound to the crisis of sovereignty that erupts at this the opening of the modern world.

But there is more, and the relationship with the Revolution is more complex. In the first part of this chapter, following on from the reading of the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* in Chapter 3, we were able to extend our understanding of the nature of the 'Synthèse'. The 'Synthèse' was now seen to be the movement which consecrates the time/space of absence through the double negation of the 'crime'. This is the second perspective, which is really only a deepening of the insights of the first. The 'global negation', which set the scene for the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* is a possibility which comes into view only when 'littérature' has discovered itself in the Revolution.

This negation of the world to a pure absence is the ultimate ideal of 'littérature', at least on one of the 'slopes' that Blanchot describes. 'D'un côté', says Blanchot, 'la littérature ne s'intéresse qu'à son sens, à son absence, et cette absence, il voudrait atteindre absolument en elle-même et pour elle-même, voulant atteindre dans son ensemble le mouvement indéfini de la compréhension' (*PF*, p. 328) [On the one hand, literature's only interest in a thing is the meaning of the thing, its absence, and it would like to attain this absence absolutely in and for itself, to grasp in its entirety the infinite movement of comprehension (*WF*, p. 325)]. So, on this slope: 'littérature est tournée vers le mouvement de négation par lequel les choses sont séparées d'elles-mêmes et détruit pour êtres connues, assujetties, communiquées' (*PF*, p. 332) [literature is turned towards the movement of negation by which things are separated from themselves and destroyed in order to be known, subjugated, communicated (*WF*, p. 330)]. On this 'slope' of 'littérature' we find the idealist Mallarmé, the one whose ultimate goal is to lead language to a supreme silence, or what he refers to as a 'significatif silence'.[35] Literature, says Blanchot is not content to accept only the 'fragmentary, successive results of this movement of negation: it wants to grasp the movement itself and it wants to *comprehend the results in their totality*' (my emphasis). But this ultimate goal is undone in its accomplishment because of the ambiguity of the negating power of the word. In his essay dedicated to Mallarmé in *La Part du feu*, 'Le Mythe de Mallarmé', Blanchot gives an early indication of the torment of literary language:

> Au moment même où le langage nous environne d'une absence universelle et nous délivre de l'obsession de la présence du monde, voici que le silence, pour s'exprimer, fait appel à quelque chose de matériel, se rend présent d'une manière qui ruine l'orgueilleux édifice élevé sur le vide et, lui l'absence même, n'a, pour s'introduire dans le monde des valeurs signifiées et abstraites, d'autre ressource que de se réaliser comme une chose. (*PF*, p. 44)
>
> [At the very instant language surrounds us with a universal absence and delivers us from the obsession with the word's presence, it is here that silence, to express itself, calls on something material, makes itself present in a manner that ruins the proud building constructed over the void, and it, absence itself, has no other recourse, to introduce itself to the world of signified and abstract values, but to be realized as a thing (*WF,* p. 37)]

In the achievement of the Absolute, when the Occident guarantees the truth of the Orient, when the world has been reduced to a 'significatif silence', Mallarmé is struck by what Blanchot terms 'le scandale du langage', or a 'paradoxe insurmontable' (here the problematic closure we encountered above comes to disrupt the origin,

the Orient).[36] It is the 'materiality' of language which remains as the presence of absence. This scandal is evoked again in 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', where Blanchot asks: 'Comment l'absence infinie de la compréhension pourrait-elle accepter de se confondre avec la présence limitée et bornée d'un mot seul?' (*PF*, p. 328) [How could the infinite absence of comprehension consent to be confused with the limited, restricted presence of a single word? (*WF*, p. 326)]. At this stage of Blanchot's essay, the 'materiality' of the word is an insurmountable obstacle. However, the position of 'littérature' is even more complex and this obstacle will turn out to be its saving grace.

When we use a word, says Blanchot, following Hegel, we enter into the realm of the universal. I cannot say the singular with language because there is simply no place for the unique as soon as I begin to speak.[37] But, for Blanchot, 'littérature' has a strangely ethical role. 'Littérature' wants to take the side of the 'unutterable', it wants to 'say' what cannot be said, to 'name' the 'unnameable'. After announcing this second predicament, Blanchot clarifies:

> Dans la parole meurt ce qui donne vie à la parole; la parole est la vie de cette mort, elle est 'la vie qui porte la mort et se maintient en elle'. Admirable puissance. Mais quelque chose était là, qui n'y est plus. Quelque chose a disparu. Comment le retrouver, comment me retourner vers ce qui est avant, si tout mon pouvoir consiste à en faire ce qui est après? Le langage de la littérature est la recherche de ce moment qui la précède. (*PF*, p. 329)
>
> [In speech what dies is what gives life to speech; speech is the life of that death, it is 'the life that endures death and maintains itself in it'. What a wonderful power. But something was there and is no longer there. Something has disappeared. How can I recover it, how can I turn around and look at what exists *before*, if all my power consists of making it into what exists *after*? The language of literature is the search for this moment which precedes literature (*WF*, p. 327)]

'Littérature' seeks to speak for the other. This is the other which cannot be heard by reason, 'the untrue, the irrational' (Hegel, see quotation from the *Phenomenology* in note 37 above). We have only ever thought in terms of the universal, and Blanchot subscribes to Hegel's analysis that there is no access for reason to the region which thought/language destroys so that the world makes sense.[38] Blanchot refers to the realm of thought as that of the 'day'. The 'day' is mediated to us by the universalizing process of language, and it would be the worst kind of madness (the naive madness of Hegel's 'they') to think that the immediate could be understood as the mediate.[39] The region that precedes the 'day' cannot appear in the light of day. But, for Blanchot, this other which strictly speaking cannot be thought, can still draw our attention; it can still call for us to respond to it.[40] This is an ethical position because the other is not only the object destroyed by language. The other is also the one I address when I use language, but the other who cannot but appear in the light of the 'day' and who is consequently also destroyed in his/her singularity (reduced to the same by reason). The other is also the 'I' before becoming an 'I', before becoming a 'subject' of language.[41] At this stage, however, the ethical dimension of Blanchot's work remains in the background, only to become more explicit in the later volume, *L'Entretien infini*.[42]

Blanchot's two 'slopes' of 'littérature' each respond to a different interpretation of the process of negation according to which the word is 'la vie qui porte la mort et se maintient en elle'. On the first 'slope', this negation constitutes the truth of the world; meaning arises out of that negation. The second 'slope' is still concerned with this negation, but it no longer finds in this absence the possibility of truth. So, when Blanchot reads Mallarmé's famous declaration from *Crise de vers* ('Je dis: une fleur!') he finds two contradictory desires. On the first 'slope', the negation of the flower accomplished by the word proceeds to the truth of the flower — meaning in absence. On the other 'slope', the word has negated the flower in its existence, in its singularity, in order that it should be comprehended as a universal — here 'littérature' is concerned with what is lost so that meaning can arise. 'Littérature' is therefore caught in an insoluble paradox, torn between two irreconcilable 'slopes': it wants the universal truth to which the act of negation gives rise, and it wants the singular 'truth' of the world before the work of meaning has begun.[43]

Above, we saw that the 'materiality' of language was an obstacle to the accomplishment of truth through absence. On the second 'slope', however, this 'materiality' is viewed differently: the word is still an obstacle, but its brute reality means that it is able to align itself with the world before it has become meaningful, before it has become the 'world'. 'Où réside donc mon espoir d'atteindre ce que je repousse?' [Then what hope do I have of attaining the thing I push away?], asks Blanchot, and his answer: 'Dans la matérialité du langage, dans ce fait que les mots aussi sont des choses [...] Tout à l'heure, la réalité des mots était un obstacle. Maintenant, elle est ma seule chance' (*PF*, p. 330) [My hope lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things, too [...] Just now, the reality of words was an obstacle, now it is my only chance (*WF*, p. 327)]. On this 'slope', language is no longer orientated towards meaning. Language in fact seeks to make itself 'insensé', and so all its 'physical' aspects come to the fore: 'Tout ce qui est physique joue le premier rôle: le rythme, le poids, la masse, la figure, et puis le papier sur lequel on écrit, la trace de l'encre, le livre' (*PF*, p. 330) [The physical comes into play: rhythm, weighting, mass, figure, and then the paper on which you write, the mark made by the ink, the book (*WF*, p. 327)]. Instead of being an idealizing force, the word is a 'puissance obscure'. It is by turning away from its power to produce meaning through negation and by drawing attention to itself as a brute reality that the word can take the side of what Hegel calls 'the untrue' or 'the irrational', and what Blanchot calls 'la présence des choses, avant que le *monde* ne soit' [the presence of things, before the *world* exists].[44] It is with this movement to its second 'slope' that 'littérature' tends towards a self-interrogation. Blanchot writes:

> Quand elle refuse de nommer, quand du nom elle fait une chose obscure, insignifiante, témoin de l'obscurité primordiale, ce qui, ici, a disparu — le sens du nom — est bel et bien détruit, mais à la place a surgi la signification en général, le sens de l'insignifiance incrustée dans le mot comme expression de l'obscurité de l'existence, de sorte que, si le sens précis des termes s'est éteint, maintenant s'affirme la possibilité même de signifier, le pouvoir vide de donner un sens, étrange lumière impersonnelle. (*PF*, p. 331)

> [When literature refuses to name anything, when it turns a name into something obscure and meaningless, witness to the primordial obscurity,

> what has disappeared in this case — the meaning of the name — is really destroyed, but signification in general has appeared in its place, the meaning of the meaninglessness embedded in the word as expression of the obscurity of existence, so that although the precise meaning of the terms has faded, what asserts itself now is the very possibility of signifying, the empty power of bestowing meaning — a strange impersonal light (*WF*, p. 329)]

When the movement of idealization is checked, that is, when the word no longer functions as a word but draws attention to itself as a word, Blanchot says that 'littérature' discovers 'la signification en général'. Language does not in this way bring to light the obscure region which the 'day' obliterates. Rather, it encounters the impossibility of accessing in the 'day' the moment that precedes the 'day'. There is nothing here except the impossibility of putting a stop to meaning — the scene of meaning's generation. In his analysis of 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', Gasché comments:

> In its quest for what language excludes, literature discovers signification in general, but not as some transcendental in the strict sense of language's capacity to make something appear, but as an inescapable degree zero of meaning to which even the meaningless must bend. Literature thus experiences the condemnation of language to signify, its inability to disappear, and stop making sense.[45]

'Littérature' discovers here what Blanchot calls the 'fatality' of the 'day'. The 'day' has no access to what precedes it, and at the 'degree zero of meaning' there is still meaning even if it does not mean anything. There is the 'simple impuissance à cesser d'être' — what we considered in the first part of this chapter as the *il y a*.

'Littérature' is the site where the paradox at the heart of language is aggravated to the point where it draws attention to itself. In everyday language, the ambiguity of the word is limited: 'la langue courante limite l'équivoque. Elle enferme solidement l'absence dans une présence' (*PF*, p. 328] [everyday language limits the ambiguity. It solidly encloses the absence in a presence (*WF*, p. 341)], but 'littérature' does no such thing, it gets caught up on the double quality of the 'nothing' that the word produces in its negation of the world.[46] The last pages of 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort' are dedicated to this ambiguity which torments 'littérature'. In 'littérature', says Blanchot, 'l'ambiguïté est comme livrée a ses excès' (*PF*, p. 328) [In literature, ambiguity is in some senses abandoned to its excesses (*WF*, p. 341)]. When it discovers the 'scandal' that the truth of the world can only be communicated through the 'materiality' of the word, it is drawn by a desire to know what has been destroyed so that that truth can arise. The contradictory pull of these two desires, for truth on the first 'slope' and for the singular existence of the world before language makes it meaningful on the second, puts 'littérature' in an impossible position. The desire to create a work which is meaningful, which is truth and beauty, is undone ('désœuvré') by a counter desire which seeks the works 'origin': the obscure region which precedes the 'day'.

Mallarmé, we have seen, encounters the brute fact of language when he pushes to the extreme the negation of the world demanded by the first 'slope' of 'littérature'. He encounters it, says Blanchot, as the scandal of language and a

'paradoxe insurmontable'. With this paradox, Mallarmé's work changes 'slope'. In the reading of the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*, we noted that in the very movement of the 'Synthèse', when the 'sonnet nul' is consecrated in its reflexive turn, what Mallarmé encounters is the 'nothing-ing of nothing'. He discovers the scandal of language in a poem that is unable to annul itself; even when it says 'nothing', it is constrained in this movement to 'say-itself-saying-nothing'. We come back again, at this juncture to the extraordinarily felicitous word 'ptyx'. Intended as a nothing word, a pure absence, it cannot help but re-mark itself as a word saying nothing. At this extreme limit of the first 'slope', where what is sought is a 'significatif silence', there is nothing but meaning 'errant comme un pouvoir vide'; nothing but the scene of meaning's generation.[47] Referring back to the first section of this chapter, where we were interested in Blanchot's reading of *Igitur* in terms of the night and the *other* night, we may say now that the first 'slope' of 'littérature' coordinates with the experience of the first night, where the suicide is achieved and death is possible. This night is the dialectical resolution of the 'day', where the work of the negative arrives at its term (the Occident confirms the truth of the Orient). The second 'slope', coordinated with the *other* night, is the one where death is not possible, where 'Certainement subsiste une présence de Minuit' (the redoubled closure of the Occident fails to assure the truth of the Orient, the origin becomes a problem). Reading the *Sonnet* in conjunction with *Igitur* is an extremely instructive exercise because it is precisely here, in the reflexive turn of the *Sonnet*, that we find the ambiguity at the heart of 'littérature' isolated in all its purity, and then re-marked in the pages of the 'tale'. This point is, Blanchot affirms, the centre, the 'concentration de l'ambiguïté'.[48]

2. From Orpheus to 'L'Absence de livre'

2.1. Orpheus

L'Espace littéraire famously opens with a directive to the reader in which Blanchot draws attention to a section of the book which has a particular methodological significance.[49] As the book's displaced centre, 'Le Regard d'Orphée' acts as a guide for the reader, a way of orientating himself in the complex of fragmentary discussions that constitute the rest of the work.[50] It is as though Blanchot's searching readings of modern writers have all been mobilized by an obscure desire, the desire of 'littérature' itself, and this desire is expressed by Blanchot through an interpretation of the myth of Orpheus. In this interpretation, Blanchot redeploys the vocabulary of 'day' and 'night' that we have been examining in this chapter. It becomes clear, therefore, that the myth of Orpheus is being enlisted as a means by which Blanchot can voice his position in his ongoing debate with Hegel.[51] In this second part of the chapter, I will turn to the 'Le Regard d'Orphée', asking why the movement of 'littérature' described by Blanchot's interpretation of this myth represents a radical challenge to Hegelianism, and then to the metaphysical thought of the West which found its accomplishment in Hegel's work. I will continue the analysis by turning to 'L'Absence de livre' in *L'Entretien infini*, where Blanchot explicitly puts Hegel into conversation with Mallarmé. Demonstrating the way in which Blanchot's

work situates Mallarmé's writings as a radical challenge to the totalizing impulse of the Hegelian dialectic will provide an invaluable perspective from where it will be possible to proceed to Derrida's reading of Mallarmé in Chapter 5.

The torment of Orpheus is precisely the torment produced by the ambiguity of 'littérature', encountered in the first part of this chapter, where it finds itself divided between the contradictory demands of the two 'slopes'. On the first 'slope', 'littérature' is concerned with truth. 'Je dis: une fleur!' and in the absence that the negation of the word produces, I find the ideal flower, the one missing from all bouquets. On this 'slope', we find the Orpheus who is bound to the law of the 'day'. He is bound by the exigency of meaning or truth. When Orpheus descends into the underworld, he can have Eurydice provided that he has her according to the law of the 'day', he can lead her back to the 'day' so long as he does not turn to look at her. Eurydice is the most obscure 'point' of the work, she is the work's inspiration — she is the world which demands to be known in its truth. According to this first demand: 'Son *œuvre*, c'est de le [the 'point'/Eurydice] ramener au jour et de lui donner, dans le jour, forme, figure et réalité' (*EL*, p. 225) [His *work* is to bring it back to the light of day and to give it form, shape, and reality in the day (*SL*, p. 171)]. If Orpheus were to obey this law then he would have done so, however, only by betraying a desire which is no less demanding. Orpheus is trapped and tormented by the ambiguity of language. Here, we encounter Orpheus on the other 'slope' of 'littérature'. On this 'slope', he wants Eurydice before she has emerged into the 'day', before she becomes meaningful in a work. Orpheus must forget the demand of the 'day' which requires that he make Eurydice meaningful. He must forget his work, so that he can turn to Eurydice as she is in the heart of the night. Forgetting the work, Orpheus forgets the law of the 'day' and looks back:

> Mais Orphée, dans le mouvement de sa migration, oublie l'œuvre qu'il doit accomplir, et il l'oublie nécessairement, parce que l'exigence ultime de son mouvement, ce n'est pas qu'il y ait œuvre, mais que quelqu'un se tienne en face de ce 'point'. (*EL*, p. 225)
>
> [But Orpheus, in the movement of his migration forgets the work he is to achieve, and he forgets it necessarily, for the ultimate demand which his movement makes is not that there be a work, but that someone face this 'point' (*SL*, p. 171)]

For Blanchot, the Greek myth speaks first of all of the law according to which the work is made: 'La profondeur ne se livre pas en face, elle ne se révèle qu'en se dissimulant dans l'œuvre' [The deep does reveal itself directly; it is only disclosed hidden in the work]. But then it speaks of the necessary transgression of that law: 'le mythe ne montre pas moins que le destin d'Orphée est aussi de ne pas soumettre à cette loi dernière' [the myth shows nonetheless that Orpheus's destiny is not to submit to this ultimate law]. These two demands are contradictory. The second, according to which Orpheus looks at his inspiration as she is in her nocturnal element, is incompatible with the first in which she is transposed into a meaningful reality. Orpheus is in a double bind and he cannot obey one of the demands without, in the very same movement, betraying the other.

One of the demands, however, is given a kind of priority over the other in

Blanchot's interpretation. The demand to look at Eurydice in the heart of the night is referred to as 'l'exigence ultime'. It is Orpheus's destiny, from the moment that he begins his work, that he will betray that work and turn to look at his inspiration precisely where he cannot see her, where she is 'invisible'.[52] The 'day' condemns this movement as a madness; Eurydice, as she is in the night, is what Hegel would refer to as the 'untrue' or the 'irrational'. She has no truth except mediated in the song. The 'day' also condemns Orpheus for his impatience. He is guilty because he could not wait to see her in a completed work and so destroyed the work by turning towards her. For Blanchot, however, this impatience is not as simple as it may seem. Turning towards Eurydice, Orpheus begins an infinitely problematic relation with something which excludes the possibility of any relation, and in this regard his attitude must be that of the highest patience:

> la vraie patience n'exclut pas l'impatience, elle en est l'intimité, elle est l'impatience souffert et enduré sans fin. L'impatience d'Orphée est donc aussi un mouvement juste: en elle commence ce qui va devenir sa propre passion, sa plus haute patience, son séjour infini dans la mort. (*EL*, p. 228)
>
> [true patience does not exclude impatience. It is intimacy with impatience — impatience suffered and endured endlessly. Orpheus's impatience is thus at the same time a proper movement: in it begins what will become his own passion, his highest patience, his infinite sojourn in death (*SL*, p. 173)]

For Blanchot, therefore, to respond to the demand that calls for the transgression of the law of the 'day' is not only inevitable, but also, it is to respond to the ultimate demand of the work. This is why, even while Orpheus is condemned for his stupidity by the 'day', the work says nothing; 'l'œuvre ne le juge pas': 'Et tout se passe comme si, en désobéissant à la loi, en regardant Eurydice, Orphée n'avait fait qu'obéir à l'exigence profonde de l'œuvre' (*EL*, p. 228) [And everything proceeds as if, by disobeying the law, by looking at Eurydice, Orpheus had only obeyed the deep demand of the work (*SL*, p. 173)]. It is only in this transgression that the work is 'authentic'. It is worth comparing here Blanchot's comment on the authenticity of the work with the comment quoted in note 38 above on the 'mediate' and the 'immediate':

> Mais si l'inspiration dit l'échec d'Orphée et Eurydice deux fois perdue [...] l'inspiration, vers cet échec et vers cette insignifiance, tourne et force Orphée par un mouvement irrésistible, comme si ce que nous appelons l'insignifiant, l'inessentiel, l'erreur, pouvait, à celui qui en accepte le risque et s'y livre sans retenue, se révéler comme la source de toute authenticité. (*EL*, p. 229)
>
> [But if inspiration pronounces Orpheus's failure and declares Eurydice lost twice over [...] it turns Orpheus and it propels him toward that failure and that insignificance irresistibly, as if to renounce failure were much graver than to renounce success, as if what we call the insignificant, the inessential, error, could, to one who accepts the risk and surrenders to it without restraint, reveal itself as the source of all authenticity (*SL*, p. 173)]
>
> Cet immédiat, la singularité immédiate (intuition ou vision ineffable), faut-il affirmer, avec Hegel, que ce n'est rien, la plus plate des banalités — ou bien qu'inviolé et sauf, c'est, de jadis et de toujours, l'être même en son secret? (*EI*, p. 53)[53]

> [Must we affirm with Hegel that this immediate, this immediate singularity (intuition or ineffable vision) is nothing, the most vain and banal of platitudes — or rather that, inviolate and safe, has long been, and always has been being itself in its very secret? (*IC*, p. 37)]

For Blanchot, 'littérature' transgresses the law of meaning, and this is its ultimate duty. There is nowhere else in the 'world' (the 'world' which is by definition meaningful) where this 'insignifiance', this 'rien', has the possibility of declaring itself. 'Littérature' is in a unique position where it can turn to 'being' as it is in its secret; before it *is*. If Hegel is a constant and unavoidable reference, it is firstly because his work (as philosophy) was entirely orientated by the exigency of truth, but also because, in showing how absolute knowledge arises as a possibility in the world, he inadvertently indicated the site from which the closure of his system is contested. Because it resists, absolutely, becoming a moment of truth or meaning, the 'origin' of the work cannot be incorporated by any philosophy. This is of course the other pole of the impossible closure we encountered in the last chapter — the circle does not close, and so the Orient and the Occident alike are undone.

The 'place' to which the work now draws attention is referred to by Blanchot through a number of terms, some of which were dropped and some of which remained operative. Perhaps the most famous of these are the 'neuter' or the 'outside'. It is in terms of a radical exteriority, an outside which is not simply the opposite of the inside, that Blanchot contests Hegel in 'L'Absence de livre', the final section of *L'Entretien infini*.[54] At the end of this chapter, I will turn to this text to see how Blanchot associates the name 'Mallarmé' with the movement which transgresses the law of the 'book' towards 'l'absence de livre'.

2.2. 'L'Absence de livre'

In 'L'Absence de livre', Blanchot returns once again to the 'oppositional' analysis we have been examining in this chapter. In *L'Espace littéraire* this reading strategy placed the 'night' in 'opposition' to the '*other* night', and this structuring was, in turn, a redeployment of the analysis of 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort', where the ambiguity of 'littérature' was considered in terms of the two 'slopes' (we find a further echo in the two demands of literature encountered in reading of the myth of Orpheus). In 'L'Absence de livre', there is something of a broadening of perspective, and the 'opposition' is here recalled in terms of the 'livre' and 'l'absence de livre'. It is a broadening of perspective because Blanchot's claims for 'littérature' take on an historic dimension which until *L'Entretien infini* has remained more implicit. This new perspective is certainly, in part, encouraged by the work of Derrida which was beginning to make a considerable impact in the human sciences with the recent publication of *De la grammatologie*, *L'Écriture et la différence*, and *La Voix et le phénomène* (all in 1967).[55] But in many regards, although his writing becomes more hyperbolic at this time, Blanchot is only drawing the broader consequences of his work to date.[56]

What, then, is the 'livre', and how is it situated in respect to Blanchot's analyses of 'littérature' which we have been considering? In section 3 of 'L'Absence de livre',

Blanchot broaches the first part of this question. Culture, he says, is bound to the 'livre'. This is not simply, however, the empirical observation that books are the repository of information in our culture. The 'livre' is situated in a certain respect 'before' any actual book as the guarantor of its meaning: [57]

> Le livre n'est pas seulement le livre des bibliothèques, ce labyrinthe où s'enroulent en volumes toutes les combinaisons des formes, des mots et des lettres. Le livre est le Livre. A lire, à écrire, toujours déjà écrit, toujours déjà transi par la lecture, le livre forme la condition pour toute possibilité de lecture et d'écriture. (*EI*, p. 621)
>
> [The book is not only the book found in libraries, that labyrinth where all the combinations of forms, words, and letters are rolled into volumes. The book is the Book. Still to be read, to be written, always already written and thoroughly penetrated by reading, the book constitutes the condition for every possibility of reading and writing (*IC*, p. 423)]

We only ever read or write in relation to the 'Livre', now capitalized, as the condition of all reading and writing. As such, Blanchot says that 'le livre est l'*a priori* du savoir' [the book is the *a priori* of knowledge]. The Absolute of the 'livre' is therefore an absolute authority: 'L'absolu du livre est alors l'isolement d'une possibilité prétendant ne prendre origine dans aucune autre autorité' [So, the absolute of the book is the isolation of a possibility that claims not to originate in any other authority]. This movement to self-authorization is the passage to the Absolute which we encountered as the motivation in Mallarmé's early poetics. It also gives orientation to the whole of the *Phenomenology*, which is authorized teleologically by its own conclusion, where the Occident guarantees the truth of the Orient. This is the insight that Hegel drew from the French Revolution.[58] The 'Livre' in this absolute sense is the end point of history, and it is only when the historical process has arrived at this last of its moments that it can be grasped retrospectively as a dialectical movement on its way to accomplishment. Blanchot does not hesitate to associate the names of Hegel and Mallarmé with this passage to the Absolute:

> Absolu qui ensuite tendra chez les romantiques (Novalis), puis plus rigoureusement chez Hegel, puis plus radicalement, mais d'une manière autre chez Mallarmé, à s'affirmer comme la totalité des rapports (le savoir absolu ou l'Œuvre), où s'accomplirait soit la conscience qui se sait elle-même et revient à elle-même, après s'être extériorisée en toutes ses figures dialectiquement liées, soit le langage refermé sur sa propre affirmation et déjà dispersé. (*EI*, p. 621)
>
> [An absolute that will later tend to be affirmed with the romantics (Novalis), then more rigorously with Hegel, then more radically (though in a different way) with Mallarmé as the totality of relations (absolute knowledge or the Work) in which would be accomplished either consciousness, which knows itself and comes back to itself after having exteriorised itself in all its dialectically linked figures, or language, closing upon its own affirmation and already dispersed (*IC*, p. 423)]

Already in this quotation, however, Blanchot is playing Mallarmé off against Hegel. The 'Livre' seeks the re-establishment of truth as presence: 'Quelque chose est là, que le livre présente en se présentant et que la lecture anime, rétablit, par son animation, dans la vie d'une présence' [Something is there that the book presents in

presenting itself, and that reading animates and re-establishes through its animation in the life of a presence]. This re-establishment of truth as presence is the ultimate horizon of thought.[59] The 'Livre' is orientated by presence/truth, but in Mallarmé's writing, in his *Œuvre*, we are confronted by what Blanchot calls 'l'absence de livre'. 'L'absence de livre' is not simply what the 'Livre' has not yet been able to comprehend, not 'son Sens toujours éludé' [its still elided Meaning], but is situated radically outside the 'Livre': 'Elle est plutôt en dehors de lui, pourtant enfermé en lui, moins son extérieur que la référence à un dehors qui ne le concerne pas' (*EI*, p. 622) [Rather it is outside the book, although enclosed within it — not so much its exterior as the reference to an outside that does not concern it (*IC*, p. 423)]. It indicates a relation to an outside that the 'Livre' carries in its interior but which does not concern the 'Livre' because it simply cannot. It is unthinkable in terms of truth and presence.

Blanchot opens this last section of *L'Entretien infini* with a quotation from Mallarmé: 'Ce jeu insensé d'écrire' [This insane game of writing], and says that by these words, Mallarmé opens writing to writing. It is when writing becomes a 'jeu insensé', that is, a game which is no longer orientated by meaning (*in-sensé*), that it becomes what it is. Writing here is a relationship, not with the 'production du livre' [production of the book], but with 'l'absence d'œuvre' [absence of work]. Writing becomes what Blanchot terms 'désœuvrement' [unworking]: 'Écrire comme désœuvrement (au sens actif de ce mot), c'est le jeu insensé' [Writing as unworking (in the active sense of the word) is the insane game]. The 'livre' is a 'ruse' by which writing enters the 'jeu insensé'. When Blanchot uses the word 'ruse' in this context, he ups the stakes on Hegel. If, for Hegel, reason advances using historical figures in a 'ruse' to its own ends, for Blanchot, reason is the dupe of 'writing': 'Le Livre: ruse par laquelle l'écriture va vers *l'absence de livre*' [The Book: a ruse by which writing goes towards the *absence of the book*]. At its limit, 'écriture' separates itself from the 'Livre': 'Le livre, ruse par laquelle l'énergie d'écrire qui prend appui sur le discours et se laisse porter par son immense continuité pour se séparer, à la limite, de lui' (*EI*, p. 624) [The book: a ruse by which the energy of writing — which relies on discourse and allows itself to be carried along by the vast continuity of discourse in order, at the limit, to separate itself from it (*IC*, p. 424)]. Where writing is orientated by meaning there is what Blanchot calls 'la *loi* du livre' (also, the law of the 'day', the first night, the first 'slope'), but where writing is drawn by the 'outside' there is the transgression of this law (also, the *other* night, the second 'slope', Orpheus's ultimate duty). For Blanchot, the era of the 'livre' is the Biblical era; the 'livre' is theological inasmuch as it is orientated by truth and meaning. If the name of Hegel marks the accomplishment of the theological era, closing it down in his system of absolute knowledge, then the name Mallarmé marks the disruption of this closure: 'Mallarmé transperce aussitôt, par la force propre de son expérience, le livre pour désigner (dangereusement) l'Œuvre dont le centre d'attrait — le centre toujours decentré — serait l'écriture. Écriture, *le jeu insensé*' (*EI*, p. 630) [But, through the very force of his experience, Mallarmé immediately pierces the book in order (dangerously) to designate the Work whose centre of attraction — a centre always off-centre — would be writing. The act of writing, *the insane game* (*IC*, p. 429)].[60]

This is the reason why Blanchot dedicates a section of *L'Entretien infini* to a discussion 'Sur un changement d'époque' [On a change of epoch]. 'Writing' ('ce jeu insensé d'écrire') enters into relation with an outside that is heterogeneous to the historical epoch of the 'livre'. Because it is the site of a radical challenge to the paradigm in which works have been comprehended and produced, 'littérature' itself becomes an uncertain designation — we do not know where it is going and where it might lead us. In the 'Note' at the beginning of *L'Entretien infini*, Blanchot writes:

> depuis Mallarmé (pour réduire celui-ci à un nom et ce nom à un repère), ce qui a tendu à rendre stériles de telles distinctions [between critical works, novels and poems], c'est que à travers elles et plus importante qu'elles, s'est fait jour l'expérience de quelque chose qu'on a continué à appeler 'littérature', mais avec un sérieux renouvelé et, de plus, entre guillemets. (*EI*, p. vi)

> [since Mallarmé (reducing the latter to a name and the name to a reference point), what has tended to render such distinctions [between critical works, novels and poems] sterile is that by way of them, and more important than they are, there has come to light the experience of something one continues to call, but with renewed seriousness, and moreover in quotation marks, 'littérature' (*IC*, p. xi)]

'Littérature' has become an uncertain designation because 'le travail et la recherche littéraires [...] contribuent à ébranler les principes et les vérités abrités par la littérature' [literary work and research [...] contribute to an unsettling of the principles and the truths that are sheltered by literature]. It is 'writing', disorientated in the 'jeu insensé' which effects this break:

> Écrire, l'exigence d'écrire: non plus l'écriture qui s'est toujours mise (par une nécessité nullement évitable) au service de la parole ou de la pensée dite idéaliste, c'est-à-dire moralisante, mais l'écriture qui, par sa force propre lentement libérée (force aléatoire d'absence), semble ne se consacrer qu'à elle-même qui reste sans identité et, peu à peu, dégage des possibilités tout autres, une façon anonyme, distraite, différée et dispersée d'être en rapport par laquelle tout est mis en cause, et d'abord l'idée de Dieu, du Moi, du Sujet, puis de la Vérité et de l'Un, puis l'idée du Livre et de l'Œuvre, en sorte que cette écriture (entendue dans sa rigueur énigmatique), loin d'avoir pour but le Livre, en marquerait plutôt la fin: écriture qu'on pourrait dire hors discours, hors langage. (*EI*, p. vii)

> [Writing, the exigency of writing: no longer the writing that has always (through a necessity in no way avoidable) been in the service of the speech or thought that is called idealist (that is to say moralising), but rather the writing that through its own slowly liberated force (the aleatory force of absence) seems to devote itself solely to itself as something that remains without identity, and little by little brings forth possibilities that are entirely other: an anonymous, distracted, deferred, and dispersed way of being in relation, by which everything is brought into question — and first of all the idea of God, of the Self, of the Subject, then of Truth and the One, then finally the idea of the Book and the Work — so that this writing (understood in its enigmatic rigor), far from having the Book as its goal rather signals its end: a writing that could be said to be outside discourse, outside language (*IC*, p. xii)]

'Writing' in this sense marks the end of everything that has guaranteed our culture (culture bound to the 'Livre'). For this reason, Blanchot says that it 'suppose un changement radical d'époque': the end of the book opens onto an entirely other space, and the name Mallarmé marks the very site of this transition.

Notes to Chapter 4

1. Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 310 (hereafter referred to as *EL*). Translations of this work are taken from Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982 (hereafter referred to as *SL*).
2. 'Il n'y a que la Beauté; et elle n'a qu'une expression parfaite — la Poésie' [There is only Beauty; and it has but one perfect expression — Poetry] (*CLP*, p. 341, letter to Cazalis, dated 14 May 1867).
3. What is here being called 'littérature' is certainly not a unified concept, and it does not for this reason have an identical semantic charge that can be transferred between Blanchot's and Derrida's texts (or even within their own texts). For both authors, it names a movement or a displacement of the text. I will follow Timothy Clark's practice of marking it as a neologism by leaving it untranslated.
4. Further discussion of Blanchot's reading of Mallarmé can be found in Leslie Hill's article 'Blanchot and Mallarmé', *MLN*, 105 (1990), 889–913. The principal focus of Hill's essay is Blanchot's use of Mallarmé's distinction between 'everyday' and 'essential' language (from *Crise de vers*). There is a tendency to reduce Mallarmé's role in this formative period of Blanchot's thought to this distinction. This chapter seeks to avoid this reduction by examining Mallarmé's significance in the other operative distinction in 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort'; that made between the two 'slopes' of 'littérature'.
5. From the preface to the 1986 edition of Emmanuel Levinas *De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1986; first published, Paris: Fontaine, 1947).
6. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit,* p. 487.
7. *CLP*, p. 440 (letter to Cazalis, July 1869).
8. Georges Poulet, 'Mallarmé', in *La Distance intérieure* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1952). On Blanchot's use of Poulet's article, see J. Gregg, 'Writing and Death', in *Maurice Blanchot and the Literature of Transgression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 42–44.
9. In his reading of *Igitur* Blanchot would have had access to the text as it was assembled for publication from the manuscript by Dr Bonniot. In the later edition of the *OC*, Bertrand Marchal says in an editorial note that Bonniot's arrangement sought to impose an order on the material that does not exist in reality. The text is much more discontinuous and fragmentary than we are led to believe from its initial publication. The later version of the *OC* presents the text in its unfinished and fractured state. This new editorial line therefore emphasizes the way in which the text's formal quality (as incomplete/fragmentary) mirrors its content (as emphasized by Blanchot) whereby the suicide does not attain completion because it is, as we shall see, essentially impossible. The formal disintegration of the work or its impossible integration is something which will continue to interest Blanchot as he develops a notion of 'fragmentary' writing. I will nevertheless continue to refer to the earlier arrangement (*OC*, 1945) as this is the one which was available to Blanchot and on which his commentaries are based.
10. *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), hereafter referred to as *PF*.
11. See sections 'Midnight' in Chapter 2, and 'The "Sonnet nul"' in Chapter 3.
12. Poulet, 'Mallarmé', in *La Distance intérieure*, p. 305.
13. In the editorial notes in the critical edition of the *OC* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), the editors note that in April 1864 Mallarmé heard that his poem had been read, along with *L'Azur*, by Emmanuel des Essarts in front of Baudelaire. There is a striking similarity of theme in Baudelaire's *Anywhere out of the World*, published in the *Revue national et étagère*, 28 September 1867, and then collected in the posthumous *Le Spleen de Paris: petits poèmes en prose,* ed. by Robert Kopp (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), such that Baudelaire's prose piece may be seen as a response to the work of the young poet. Baudelaire's text begins: 'Cette vie est un hôpital où chaque malade est possédé du désir

de changer le lit. Celui-ci voudrait souffrir en face du poêle, et celui-là croit qu'il guérirait à côte de la fenêtre' [This life is a hospital where every patient is possessed by the idea of changing beds. This one here would like to suffer opposite the stove, and this other believes that he will be cured by the window] (p. 220).

14. *OC*, p. 32.
15. The desire to accomplish this movement is also powerfully evoked in 'Le Pitre châtié' where the passage takes place through the death of the clown who is purified when he passes through the hole in the canvas to drown and be reborn 'Autre que l'histrion' in the glacial waters beyond. It is in the later published version (1887) that the process of purification, through which the clown is cleansed of his 'fard', is considered in terms of an ordeal of death and rebirth.
16. 'Mallarmé', in *La Distance intérieure*, p. 306.
17. Cf. Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959): 'Le poète disparait sous la pression de l'œuvre, par le même mouvement qui fait disparaitre la réalité naturelle' [The poet disappears under the pressure of the work, by the same movement which makes the natural world disappear] (pp. 309–10).
18. On this subject, see Gardner Davies, *Vers une explication rationnelle du "Coup de Dés"* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1953), pp. 24–28, especially: 'Il importe [...] de mettre l'auteur lui-même à l'abri des accidents de l'existence humaine, susceptible de laisser une empreinte sur la généralité de l'œuvre [...] il lui faut reculer "au-delà de toute vie possible", et s'affranchir de l'influence du temps et de l'espace, pour n'être plus qu'Esprit' [The important thing [...] is to protect the author himself from the accidents of human existence, which would tend to leave a mark on the generality of the work [...] he must be withdrawn 'beyond all possible life', and free himself from the influence of time and space, so as to be nothing but Spirit].
19. Poulet, 'Mallarmé' in *La Distance intérieure*, p. 325.
20. Ibid., p. 325.
21. In a later sonnet, this double negation is suggested in the first line of the poem, where the same crime is referred to as a 'suicide beau' (*OC*, p. 68).
22. *OC*, p. 434.
23. Compare this to Hegel's comments in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 38: 'It is inherent in this element of the will that I am able to free myself from everything, to renounce all ends, and to abstract from everything. The human being alone is able to abandon all things, even his own life: he can commit suicide'.
24. For further discussion of the importance of Levinas's notion of the *il y a* in Blanchot's work, see: Simon Critchley, 'Il y a — A Dying Stronger than Death (Blanchot with Levinas)', *Oxford Literary Review* 15 (1993), 81–131; Critchley, 'Il y a — Holding Levinas's Hand to Blanchot's Fire', in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing,* ed. by Carolyn Bailey Gill (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Christopher Fynsk, 'Crossing the Threshold: On "Literature and the Right to Death"', in the same volume, especially pp. 76–79. These essays tend to deal with the *il y a* as it is operative in the essay in which Levinas's text is mentioned explicitly, i.e. 'La littérature et le droit à la mort'. I will look briefly at this earlier reference below. In this section, I am most interested in how Blanchot's reading of *Igitur* is marked by his reading of Levinas.
25. *De l'existence à l'existant*, p. 94.
26. Ibid., p. 95.
27. I refer again here to the quotation made above from Hegel's *Phenomenology*: 'Spirit necessarily appears in Time, and it appears in Time just so long as it has not *grasped* its pure Notion, i.e. has not annulled Time'.
28. *OC*, p. 448. That this is a reference to the *Sonnet* seems to be reinforced by the context. Just before, we read: 'Tout était parfait; elle était la Nuit pure' [Everything was perfect; it was pure Night]. 'La Nuit', we noted above, was an early title for the *Sonnet.*
29. 'la parole est [...] "la vie qui porte la mort et se maintient en elle"' [the word is [...] 'life that bears death and maintains itself in it'] says Blanchot, *PF*, p. 392. The ambiguous nature of this negating power is the subject of this section of the chapter.
30. The word 'littérature' is written here in quotation marks, firstly for the practical reason that we can in this way indicate that we are passing into a consideration of 'littérature' which is specifically Blanchotian and which is demarcated from any other use of the term. Secondly, for

the theoretical reason that in this Blanchotian context, as the site of a profound interrogation of its own essence, 'littérature' can no longer be said to *be* anything except the persistent questioning of this essence, and therefore, in itself, essentially nothing. On the subject of the status of 'littérature' in Blanchot's writings, see Rodolphe Gasché's remarks at the beginning of his essay 'The Felicities of Paradox: Blanchot on the nul-space of literature' in *Maurice Blanchot: the Demand of Writing.*

31. Translations of this work are taken from Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), hereafter referred to as *WF.*
32. On the importance of the French Revolution in Blanchot's essay, see Christopher Fynsk's contribution to *Maurice Blanchot: The Demands of Writing*, 'Crossing the Threshold', where he writes: 'The Terror he [Blanchot] suggests, represents for literature that specular, speculative moment where literature 'contemplates itself', recognises itself', and 'justifies itself' in the realisation of absolute freedom. In the Terror, literature passes into the world. It becomes 'real', we might say, it embraces existence, but only inasmuch as existence has become fabulous in giving itself over to the absolute character of the word wherein all finite determinations dissolve' (p. 71). See also Rodolph Gasché's essay, 'The Felicities of Paradox', in the same volume, especially pp. 49–50.
33. A. Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: leçons sur la 'Phénoménologie de l'esprit' professées de 1933 à 1938 à l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes*, ed. by Raymond Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 164.
34. Napoleon who, crowning himself, turns his back on the church — his authority, relying on nothing external, is absolute. This is the precise analogue of the movement traced in Chapter 2. I refer here to Jacques Louis David's 1808 painting, *The Coronation of Napoleon*. The crisis of modernity is inaugurated in this tableau.
35. Blanchot quotes Mallarmé's use of this term in his remarks on Edgar Allan Poe (*OC*, p. 872). Blanchot's reference is in 'Le Mythe de Mallarmé', in *PF*, p. 44.
36. Both terms used in 'Le Mythe de Mallarmé', in *PF*, p. 44.
37. Blanchot refers here to a text of Hegel's which predates the *Phenomenology*. It is worth quoting an extract from the chapter on 'Sense Certainty' in that book, however, as it neatly echoes what Blanchot has to say about the torment of 'literary' language: 'They speak of the existence of *external* objects, which can be more precisely defined as *actual*, absolutely *singular*, *wholly personal*, *individual* things, each of them absolutely unlike anything else; this existence they say, has absolute certainty and truth. They *mean* 'this' bit of paper on which I am writing — or rather have written — 'this'; but what they mean is not what they say. If they actually wanted to *say* 'this' bit of paper which they mean, if they wanted to *say* it, then this is impossible, because the sensuous this that is meant *cannot be reached* by language, which belongs to consciousness, i.e. to that which is inherently universal. In the actual attempt to say it, it would therefore crumble away; those who started to describe it would not be able to complete the description, but would be compelled to leave it to others, who would finally have to admit to speaking about something which *is not*. They certainly mean, then, *this* bit of paper here [...] but they say 'actual *things*', '*external* or *sensuous objects*', '*absolutely singular entities*' and so on; i.e. they say of them only what is *universal*. Consequently, what is called the unutterable is nothing else than the untrue, the irrational, what is merely meant [but is not actually expressed]' (*The Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 66). This extract has the benefit of talking specifically of 'writing', but it was perhaps less attractive to Blanchot because it misses the reference to death which is so important in his essay. See also Blanchot's comments in 'La Parole plurielle', in *L'Entretien infini:* 'Et, certes, lorsque je parle, je reconnais bien qu'il n'y a parole que parce que ce qui "est" a disparu en ce qui le nomme, frappé de mort pour devenir réalité du nom [...] quelque chose était là, qui n'y est plus; comment le retrouver, comment ressaisir, en ma parole, cette présence antérieure qu'il me faut exclure pour parler, pour la parler? Et, ici, nous évoquerons l'éternel tourment de notre langage, quand sa nostalgie se retourne vers ce qu'il manque toujours, par la nécessité où il est d'en être le manque pour le dire' (*EI*, p. 50) [And, certainly, when I speak, I recognise very well that there is speech only because what 'is' has disappeared in what names it, struck with death so as to become the reality of the name [...] something was there that is no longer. How can I find it again, how can I, in my speech, recapture this prior presence that I must exclude in order to speak, in order to speak it? And here we will evoke the eternal torment of our language when its

longing turns back towards what it always misses, through the necessity under which it labours of being the lack of what it would say (*IC*, p. xxvii)].

38. See how Blanchot marks a difference between himself and Hegel in the following comments from 'La Parole plurielle', in *EI*: 'Cet immédiat, la singularité immédiate (intuition ou vision ineffable), faut-il affirmer, avec Hegel, que ce n'est rien, la plus plate des banalités — ou bien qu'inviolé et sauf, c'est, de jadis et de toujours, l'être même en son secret?' [Must we affirm with Hegel that this immediate, this immediate singularity (intuition or ineffable vision) is nothing, the most vain and banal of platitudes — or rather that, inviolate and safe, it is, has long been, and has always been being itself in its secret?] (p. 53).
39. For further discussion of the 'mediate' and the 'immediate', see Blanchot, 'La Parole plurielle', especially: '"l'immédiat excluant tout immédiat, comme toute médiation", nous dit quelque chose sur la présence même: la présence immédiate est présence de ce qui ne saurait être présent, présence du non-accessible, présence excluant ou débordant tout présent. Cela revient à dire: l'immédiat, débordant infiniment toute possibilité présente de par sa présence même, est présence infinie de ce qui reste radicalement absent, présence toujours infiniment autre dans sa présence, présence de l'autre dans son altérité: non-présence' ['The immediate excluding everything immediate, as it does every mediation' tells us something about presence itself: immediate presence is presence of what could not be present, presence of the non-accessible, presence excluding or exceeding any present. This amounts to saying: the immediate, infinitely exceeding any present possibility by its very presence, is the infinite presence of what remains radically absent, a presence in its presence always infinitely other, presence of the other in its alterity: non-presence] (p. 54).
40. See Blanchot, 'Nommant le possible, répondant à l'impossible', in *EI*, especially: 'Nous pressentons même que le langage, fût-elle littéraire, la poésie, fût-elle véritable, n'ont pas pour rôle d'amener à la clarté, à la fermeté d'un nom, ce qui s'affirmerait, informulé, dans ce rapport sans rapport. La poésie n'est pas là pour dire l'impossibilité: elle lui répond seulement, elle dit en répondant. Telle est le partage secret de toute parole essentielle en nous: *nommant* le possible, *répondant* à l'impossible' [We sense even that it is not the role of language, be it literary or that of poetry, even true poetry, to bring to light or to the firmness of the name what would affirm itself, unformulated in this relation without relation. Poetry is not there in order to say impossibility: it simply answers to it, saying in responding. Such is the secret lot, the secret decision of every essential speech in us: *naming* the possible, *responding* to the impossible] (p. 68).
41. What Samuel Beckett finally encounters as the 'unnamable' at the end of his *Trilogy*.
42. In this volume Blanchot enters into a more explicit dialogue with the work of Levinas. It is also inflected by his reading of Derrida. In Derrida's 1964 essay on Levinas, 'Violence et métaphysique', in *L'Écriture et la difference* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967), a section entitled 'Violence de la lumière' discusses the metaphorics of illumination in the history of metaphysics, which is particularly relevant to what we are saying here about the 'day' and an alterity which cannot be comprehended in the light of the 'day'. The essay is also interesting for Derrida's remarks on 'desire' in Levinas's work which is very close to the 'desire' of 'littérature' as it is encountered in Blanchot's writings (see discussion of Orpheus below): 'Ce concept de désir est aussi anti-hegelien qu'il est possible. Il ne désigne pas le mouvement de négation et d'assimilation, la négation de l'altérité d'abord nécessaire pour devenir "conscience de soi", "certain de soi" (*Phénoménologie de l'esprit*, et *Encyclopédie*). Le désir est au contraire pour Levinas le respect et la connaissance de l'autre comme autre, moment ethico-métaphysique que la conscience doit s'interdire de transgresser [...] le mouvement du désir ne peut être ce qu'il est que comme paradoxe, comme renoncement au désiré' [This concept of desire is as anti-Hegelian as it can possibly be. It does not designate a movement of negation and assimilation, the negation of alterity first necessary in order to become 'self-conscious' 'certain of itself' (*Phenomenology of the Mind* and *Encyclopedia*). For Levinas, on the contrary, desire is the respect and knowledge of the other as other, the ethico-metaphysical moment whose transgression consciousness must forbid itself [...] the movement of desire can be what it is only paradoxically, as the renunciation of desire]. And then: 'Le désir [...] se laisse appeler par l'extériorité absolument irréductible de l'autre auquel il doit rester infiniment inadéquat [...] Aucune totalité jamais ne se fermera sur

lui, la métaphysique du désir est donc métaphysique de la séparation infinie' [Desire [...] permits itself to be appealed to by the absolutely irreducible exteriority of the other to which it must remain infinitely inadequate [...] No totality will ever encompass it. Thus, the metaphysics of desire is a metaphysics of infinite separation] (p. 137).

43. Cf. Simon Critchley in 'Il y a — A Dying Stronger than Death': 'If consciousness is nothing but this work of negation, then the second slope of literature wants to attain that point of unconsciousness, when it can somehow merge with the reality of things [...] using the Mallarméan example, literature no longer wants to say 'a flower', but desires this flower as a thing prior to the fatal act of naming' (p. 110).
44. And later, in *EI*, 'l'être même en son secret' (p. 53).
45. Gasché, 'The Felicities of Paradox', p. 56.
46. Blanchot, 'La Littérature et le droit à la mort': 'ce sens du sens des mots, qui est aussi bien le mouvement du mot vers sa vérité que son retour, par la réalité du langage, au fond obscure de l'existence, cette absence par laquelle la chose est anéantie, détruite pour devenir être et idée, nous l'avons longuement interrogée. Elle est cette vie qui porte la mort et se maintient en elle, la mort, le pouvoir prodigieux du négatif, ou encore la liberté, par le travail de quoi l'existence est détachée d'elle-même et rendue significative. Or, rien ne peut faire que, dans le moment où elle travaille à la compréhension des choses et dans le langage, à la spécification des mots, cette puissance ne s'affirme encore comme une possibilité toujours autre' [we have questioned this meaning of the meaning of words at length, this meaning which is as much the movement of a word toward its truth as it is the return through the reality of language to the obscure depths of existence; we have questioned this absence by which the thing is annihilated, destroyed in order to become being and idea. It is *that life which supports death and maintains itself in it* — death, the amazing power of the negative, of freedom, through whose work existence is detached from itself and made significant. Now, nothing can prevent this power — at the very moment it is trying to understand things and, in language, to specify words — nothing can prevent it from continuing to assert itself as continually differing possibility] (*PF*, p. 344, my emphasis).
47. Cf. the discussion in the previous section of the *il y a*.
48. See the section entitled 'Le Point central' in 'L'Expérience de Mallarmé', *L'Espace littéraire* (pp. 46–48), especially: 'Ce point est l'ambiguïté même'. D'un côté, en l'œuvre, il est ce que l'œuvre réalise, ce en quoi elle s'affirme, là où il faut qu'elle "n'admette de lumineuse évidence sinon d'exister". En se sens, il est présence de l'œuvre et l'œuvre seule le rend présent. Mais en même temps, il est "présence de Minuit", l'en deçà, ce à partir de quoi jamais rien ne commence, la profondeur vide du désœuvrement de l'être, cette région sans issue et sans réserve dans laquelle l'œuvre, par l'artiste, devient le souci, la recherche sans fin de son origine'. [This point is ambiguity itself. On the one hand, in the work, it is what the work realises, how it affirms itself, the place where the work must 'allow no luminous evidence except of existing'. In this sense, the central point is the presence of the work, and the work alone makes it present. But at the same time this point is the 'presence of Midnight,' the point anterior to all starting points, from which nothing ever begins, the empty profundity of being's inertia, that region without issue and without reserve, in which the work, through the artist, becomes the concern, the endless search for its origin (*SL*, p. 44)].
49. 'Un livre, même fragmentaire, a un centre qui l'attire: centre non pas fixe, mais qui se déplace par la pression du livre et les circonstances de sa composition. Centre fixe aussi, qui se déplace, s'il est véritable, en restant le même et en devenant toujours plus central, plus dérobé, plus incertain et plus impérieux. Celui qui écrit le livre l'écrit par désir, par ignorance de ce centre. Le sentiment de l'avoir touché peut bien n'être que l'illusion de l'avoir atteint; quand il s'agit d'un livre d'éclaircissements, il y a une sorte de loyauté méthodique à dire vers quel point il semble que le livre se dirige; ici vers les pages intitulées "Le regard d'Orphée"' (*EL*, p. 10, original text in italics) [A book, even a fragmentary one, has a centre which attracts it. This centre is not fixed, but is displaced by the pressure of the book and circumstances of its composition. Yet it is also a fixed centre which, if it is genuine, displaces itself, while remaining the same and becoming always more central, more hidden, more uncertain and more imperious. He who writes the book writes it out of desire for this centre and out of ignorance. The feeling of having touched it can very well be only the illusion of having reached it. When the book

in question is one whose purpose is to elucidate, there is a kind of methodological good faith in stating toward what point it seems to be directed: here, toward the pages entitled 'Orpheus' Gaze' (*SL*, p. 1)].

50. On Blanchot's use of the Orpheus myth in *L'Espace littéraire*, see: Chapter 4 of Gregg, *Maurice Blanchot and the Literature of Transgression*; and Chantal Michel, *Maurice Blanchot et le déplacement d'Orphée* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1997).
51. For further discussion of Blanchot's reading of Hegel, see: Andrzej Warminski, 'Dreadful Reading: Blanchot on Hegel', *Yale French Studies*, 69 (1985), 267–75; and Gasché, 'The Felicities of Paradox'.
52. On the problematic use of the vocabulary of 'visibility' and 'invisibility' (which coordinate with the terms 'mediate' and 'immediate', respectively) see the section 'René Char et la pensée du neutre' of 'L'Absence du livre', in *L'Entretien infini*, especially: 'Se rapporter à l'inconnu sans le dévoiler, par une relation de non-présence qui ne serait pas une découverte. Cela signifie très précisément que l'inconnu au neutre n'appartient pas à la lumière, qu'il appartient à une "région" étrangère à cette découverte qui s'accomplit dans et par la lumière. L'inconnu ne tombe pas sous le regard, sans être cependant caché au regard: ni visible, ni invisible ou plus justement se détournant de tout visible et de tout invisible' (*EI*, p. 443) [We have spoken of relating to the unknown without unveiling it through a relation of non-presence that would not be an uncovering. In very precise terms, this means that the unknown in the neuter does not belong to the light, but rather to a region 'foreign' to the disclosure that is accomplished in and through light. The unknown does not fall before a gaze, yet it is not hidden from it: neither visible nor invisible; or more precisely, turning itself away from every visible and every invisible (*IC*, p. 300)]. It is this radical exteriority of the 'origin' which places it beyond the mastery of metaphysics because, as Blanchot says, 'L'inconnu ne sera pas révélé, mais indiqué' (*EI*, p. 442).
53. Blanchot, 'La Parole plurielle', in *L'Entretien infini*.
54. The outside, as dialectical opposite of the inside, would be recoverable as a 'not yet meaning'; it would be potentially comprehensible within the system. As a radical exteriority, the 'outside' which Blanchot refers to with this term is situated beyond any dialectical comprehension. Above we encountered an 'invisibility' which Blanchot would like to extract from the opposition of the 'visible' and the 'invisible'; here we have an exteriority which is beyond the opposition of inside/outside. It is not surprising that this thinking which attempts to free itself from the horizon of philosophical thought should come up against these problems of language, particularly when it finds itself dealing with oppositions that play a structural role in philosophical conceptuality. On this subject, see Jacques Derrida, 'Violence et métaphysique', in *L'Écriture et la différence*, pp. 164–67, especially: 'les significations qui rayonnent à partir du Dedans-Dehors, de la Lumière-Nuit, etc., n'habitent pas seulement les mots proscrits; elles sont logées, en personne ou par procuration au cœur de la conceptualité elle-même' [the meanings which radiate from Inside-Outside, from Light-Night, etc., do not only inhabit the proscribed words; they are embedded, in person or vicariously, at the very heart of conceptuality itself].
55. I will turn to Derrida's own discussion of the 'livre' in 'La Fin du livre et le commencement de l'écriture' (in *De la grammatologie*) at the beginning of the next chapter.
56. At the beginning of the next chapter I will look in more detail at the way in which Blanchot's vocabulary is altered by the influence of Derrida, especially the first section of the first chapter of *De la grammatologie*, 'La Fin du livre et le commencement de l'écriture'.
57. 'Before' is perhaps the best word here in as much as it can mean both 'previous to, earlier, or sooner than' and also 'in front of, ahead of, in advance of'. The 'Livre' is situated 'before' any book, both as its condition of possibility and its ultimate horizon.
58. The decapitation of the King is linked indissolubly to the self-coronation of the Emperor. If the King's authority is guaranteed by a transcendent value (is theological), then the Emperor's is grounded absolutely in itself (is absolute), and this is why the Emperor will not receive his crown from any 'representative' but places the crown on his own head. If we keep returning to the Revolution, it is because the aesthetic crisis at stake in this study coordinates precisely with the crisis of political economy at the opening of the modern period, with both being brought on by a reconfiguration of sovereignty. For further discussion of why Hegel's system is not strictly speaking 'theological', see Kojève's 'Note sur l'éternité, le temps et le concept'. It is also

Kojève's essay which insists on considering the closure of Hegel's system in terms of a 'Book': 'Nous savons que pour Hegel cette fin de l'histoire est marquée par l'avènement de la Science sous la forme d'un Livre, c'est-à-dire par l'apparition dans le Monde du Sage ou du Savoir *absolu*' (*Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, p. 380). On the subject of the relationship between Hegel and Mallarmé, see Philippe Sollers, 'Littérature et totalité', in *L'Ecriture et l'expérience des limites* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1968), especially p. 80: 'Ainsi Hegel voyait-il la fin de l'Histoire sous forme d'un livre fermé: Mallarmé, lui, l'ouvre' [So Hegel saw the end of History in the form of a closed book: Mallarmé, he opened it].

59. It is at the unique hour of midnight, 'à l'heure unie' [the unified time], that *Igitur* contemplates 'le présent absolu des choses' [the absolute presence of things] (*OC*, p. 435).
60. See also *EI*, p. 626: 'L'Œuvre, absolu de la voix et de l'écriture, se désœuvre, avant même qu'elle ne s'accomplisse, avant qu'elle ne ruine, en s'accomplissant, la possibilité de l'accomplissement' [The Work, absolute of voice and writing, unworks itself, before it even completes itself, before it ruins, in its accomplishment, the possibility of accomplishment (*IC*, p. 428)].

CHAPTER 5



La Dissémination

Ceci (donc) n'aura pas été un livre.
[This will not (therefore) have been a book][1]
Jacques Derrida[2]

At the end of the last chapter, we saw how, at the beginning and at the end of *L'Entretien infini*, Blanchot situated Mallarmé's writings as a transgression of the law of the 'Livre'. With Mallarmé, 'writing' becomes a 'jeu insensé' as it comes into relation with a radical 'outside'. In this game, 'littérature' begins to overstep the metaphysical horizon which has dominated its productions — the work interrogates its own obscure 'origin' which it encounters as an alterity so extreme that the work is, itself, disorganized or unworked ('désœuvré') as it betrays or transgresses the 'law' of the 'Livre' in fidelity to a higher demand. Across the chapter as a whole, I looked at the 'oppositional' structure of Blanchot's analyses which remained as a constant, even as the terms he used to articulate his thought changed (the two 'slopes'/the night and the *other* night/Orpheus's two demands/the 'Livre' and 'l'absence de livre'). When I came to analyse the last of the 'oppositions', the 'Livre' and 'l'absence de livre', I suggested that, despite this underlying consistency, Blanchot's writing had nevertheless been inflected by the recent triple publication of Jacques Derrida's work.[3] At the beginning of this chapter, I will take a brief look at this inflection. I will then go on to examine Derrida's comments on the 'Livre' and begin to integrate Mallarmé into the discussion. In the second part of the chapter, I will focus on Derrida's readings of Mallarmé, asking why he is such a key reference in the discourse on 'dissémination' as a movement that destroys the unity of the 'Livre'. In the third part, I will develop the insights of the chapter in a discussion of the Derridian interpretation of the Mallarmean crisis.

1. The End of the Book: 'La fin du livre e(s)t le commencement de l'écriture'

> Autrement dit, le Livre indique toujours un ordre soumis à l'*unité*, un système de notions où s'affirme le primat de la parole sur l'écriture, de la pensée sur le langage et la promesse d'une communication un jour immédiate ou transparente.[4]
>
> [In other words, the Book always indicates an order that submits to *unity*, a system of notions in which are affirmed the primacy of speech over writing, of

> thought over language, and the promise of a communication that would one day be immediate and transparent]
>
> Ce genre de substitution de l'écriture à la parole autour de 1970 mériterait une histoire à part et elle n'est pas réservée à Lacan [...] Roger Laporte a fait un recensement que j'avais trouvé aussi lumineux qu'impitoyable de toutes les fois où notre ami Maurice Blanchot, republiant en recueil des textes anciens, y remplaçait tout simplement parole par écriture.[5]
>
> [This kind of substitution of writing for speech around 1970 deserves its own history, and it is not restricted to Lacan [...] Roger Laporte put together an inventory that I found to be as enlightening as it was unforgiving of all the occasions when our friend Maurice Blanchot, reissuing earlier texts in a collection, simply replaced speech with writing]

When Blanchot came to collect his essays into the volume entitled *L'Entretien infini*, he did so at a time when Derrida's work was beginning to exert a profound influence in French critical debate. From about 1963 onwards, Derrida had been publishing essays in journals such as *Critique* and *Tel Quel*. Having begun his studies in philosophy he was, through these interventions, starting to draw the broader implications of his work which until then had been more narrowly concerned with the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Working on Husserl in the wake of Heidegger, Derrida isolated what he considered to be the unanalysed, unquestioned presupposition of metaphysical thought. Metaphysics could not question the privilege accorded to 'presence', and this for the simple reason that metaphysics *is* the thinking of 'presence'. Any thought which desires to escape from its metaphysical presuppositions could not do so except through a radical kind of questioning which operates within the texts of the tradition, analysing the way in which these texts contradict themselves in order to reaffirm a blind faith in 'presence' as the ultimate locus of truth. The self-identity of 'presence', whether that be the self-identity of the object or the presence to self of consciousness is the self-identity of the West. From Plato to Hegel, philosophers have never consistently and systematically put into question the credit accorded to 'presence', and it is only in certain texts of the 'modern' period that significant displacements have suggested recourse to a writing which would displace this central motif.

Reading Husserl, Derrida analysed a (or perhaps *the*) mechanism through which the centrality of 'presence' is maintained. The thinking of 'presence' as truth must privilege the voice, living speech, as the element of absolute self-proximity. When language is written it is deposited outside at an irreducible distance from its origin. In this way, writing introduces difference into what should, by right, remain identical. There is no truth in writing because in writing meaning differs from its origin. From this, it follows that metaphysical thought will always uphold and privilege the voice, while in a complementary gesture it excludes and debases writing. Derrida's analyses of Rousseau, Levi-Strauss, and Saussure in *De la grammatologie* follow his reading of Husserl in *La Voix et le phénomène*, and it is in this way that he expands what might seem a relative and localized insight into a general 'symptom' of metaphysics as a phono-logocentric system of thought. Having analysed the privilege accorded to the voice, and the consequent exclusion of writing, Derrida's

work passes through a stage of general reversal. What if it is not in the last resort possible to credit 'presence' with an absolute authority? What if this centre cannot hold? What if what we call 'presence' cannot be thought except as an 'effect', the 'product' of an originary movement of 'espacement' or 'différance'? In his work Derrida argues that the privilege extended to 'presence' is the result of an originary repression or a repression of the origin which can only be thought as a structure of difference and delay. That is to say that the very same features which have always discredited writing are found to inhabit 'presence'. Writing is here reconceived — it not only designates writing as it is commonly understood, but now refers to the condition of 'presence' itself. The present differs from itself, which is as much as to say that the present is never present to itself, it is not present. Before there is 'presence', there is writing, an archi-writing because nothing precedes this 'origin' (not strictly an origin because the origin has always implied an Absolute present, now discredited).[6]

So, when Blanchot says that the 'Livre' has always affirmed 'le primat de la parole sur l'écriture', he is unambiguously referencing Derrida and, by that token, inscribing his own work within the opening indicated by Derrida's writings.[7] The quotation given above is not the only place in the 'Note' where Blanchot appropriates Derrida's terminology as he articulates his own position. In the preceding paragraph, Blanchot says of the writing he recognizes under the uncertain term of 'littérature' that: 'cette écriture (entendue dans sa rigueur énigmatique), loin d'avoir pour but le Livre, en marquerait plutôt la fin' [this writing (understood in its enigmatic rigor), far from having the idea of the Book as its goal, rather signals its end]; and then below: 'Écrire en ce sens [...] suppose un changement radical d'époque — la mort même, l'interruption — ou, pour parler hyperboliquement, "la fin de l'histoire"' [Writing in this sense [...] supposes a radical change of epoch: interruption, death itself — or, to speak hyperbolically, 'the end of history']. Now, granted that Blanchot and Derrida are writing in the same context, that is, to put things very schematically, after Kojève (and in awareness of Bataille's challenge to Kojève's Hegel), this series of associations which links the end of the 'Livre' with a certain 'end of history' and the movement beyond the 'Livre' with a certain practice of writing, has already been powerfully put into play.[8] It is in the triple publication of Derrida's work that these associations coalesce, so it is to these works that I will now turn.

1.1. Husserl (Time and the Sign)

Since Derrida considers *La Voix et le phénomène* to have a methodological priority amongst his early publications,[9] it makes good sense to begin here.[10] In this essay, Derrida examines the distinction Husserl makes in his work between two types of 'sign' — 'expressive' and 'indicative' — and he wonders whether Husserl's analyses of these different significations of the sign 'sign' might be dictated by metaphysical presuppositions to which Husserl is blind. It is not a matter of criticizing Husserl for his oversight, but rather of suggesting that in principle his phenomenology could not have avoided carrying these presuppositions into its analyses:

nous ne nous demanderons pas si tel ou tel héritage métaphysique a pu, ici ou là, limiter la vigilance d'un phénoménologue, mais si la forme *phénoménologique* de cette vigilance n'est pas déjà commandée par la métaphysique elle-même.[11]

[we will not be asking whether such and such metaphysical heritage has been able, here or there, to restrict the vigilance of the phenomenologist, but whether the phenomenological form of the vigilance is not already controlled by metaphysics itself][12]

Throughout the essay, Derrida constantly recalls that the 'principe des principes' of phenomenology is 'l'évidence donatrice originaire, le *présent* ou la *présence* du sens à une intuition pleine et originaire' (*VP*, p. 3) [the original self-giving evidence, the *present* or *presence* of sense to a full and primordial intuition (*SP*, p. 5)]. Husserl, Derrida argues, attempts to maintain this principle through the exclusion of the 'indicative' sign, from the pure possibility of meaning (*vouloir dire*, *bedeuten*). In order that this meaning remain a pure expression it must not venture into the world: 'Dans l'expression, l'intention est absolument expresse parce qu'elle anime une voix qui peut rester tout intérieur et que l'exprimé est une *Bedeutung*, c'est-à-dire une idéalité n''existant' pas dans le monde' (*VP*, p. 36) [In expression the intention is absolutely explicit because it animates a voice which may remain entirely internal and because the expressed is a meaning (*Bedeutung*), that is, an ideality 'existing' nowhere in the world (*SP*, p. 33)]. The 'indicative' sign is the contamination of meaning by non-presence: 'ce qui, en dernière analyse, sépare l'expression de l'indice, c'est ce qu'on pourrait appeler la non-présence immédiate à soi du présent vivant' (*VP*, p. 40) [in the final analysis what separates expression from indication could be called the immediate non-self-presence of the living present (*SP*, p. 37)]. This, says Derrida, is the defining characteristic of the indicative: there is indication whenever the act of meaning is not absolutely present to itself. And since the presence of the present is the principle of principles of phenomenology, the 'indicative' must be excluded from the field of the 'expressive' as pure proximity of meaning. Any relationship with another, outside of immediate self-presence, implies the contamination of meaning by the 'indicative', and from this Derrida isolates the essential necessity of the phenomenological soliloquy: 'Pour réduire l'indication dans le langage et regagner enfin la pure expressivité, il faut donc suspendre le rapport à autrui' (*VP*, p. 44) [To reduce indication in language and reach pure expression at last, the relation with the other must perforce be suspended (*SP*, p. 40)]; and then: 'Dans la "vie solitaire de l'âme", l'unité pure de l'expression en tant que telle devrait donc m'être en fin restituée' (*VP*, p. 45) [Thus in 'solitary mental life' the pure unity of expression as such should at last be restored to me (*SP*, p. 41)].

Everything now hinges on whether it is in fact possible to exclude the 'indicative' from the 'vie solitaire de l'âme' in soliloquy. Since the 'indicative' implies communication, Husserl must demonstrate that in the phenomenological soliloquy the subject does not communicate anything to himself. Husserl's ultimate argument, according to Derrida, is that the subject in the phenomenological soliloquy does not communicate anything to himself because there is nothing to communicate:

Si le sujet ne s'indique rien à lui-même, c'est qu'il ne peut le faire et il ne le peut parce qu'il n'en a pas besoin. Le vécu étant immédiatement présent à soi sur le

> mode de la certitude et de la nécessité absolue, la manifestation de soi à soi par la délégation ou la représentation d'un indice est impossible parce que superflue. Elle serait, à tous les sens de ce mot, *sans raison*. (*VP*, p. 65)

> [If the subject indicates nothing to himself, it is because he cannot do so, and he cannot do so because there is no need of it. Since lived experience is immediately self-present in the mode of certitude and absolute necessity, the manifestation of the self to the self through the delegation or representation of an indicative sign is impossible because it is superfluous. It would be, in every sense of the term, *without reason* (*SP*, p. 58)]

Since there is nothing to communicate, the soliloquy takes no time. The absolute self-presence of meaning in expression is essentially bound to the non-divisible instant of the present 'now': 'La presence à soi du vécu doit se produire dans le présent comme maintenant [...] Le présent de la présence à soi serait aussi indivisible qu'un *clin d'œil*' [The self-presence of experience must be produced in the present taken as a now [...] The present of self-presence would be as indivisible as the *blink of an eye*]. It implies an absolute present which can be isolated from the flux of time, a kind of non-temporal time (exactly like Midnight). In Chapter 5, 'Le Signe et le clin d'œil', Derrida draws on Husserl's own analyses of temporal flux to argue that this notion of a punctual, indivisible 'now', while it might be the ultimate resource of metaphysics, cannot, in the end, maintain its purity. The consequences of this are far reaching for philosophy generally, but first of all for Husserl's phenomenology:[13]

> Si la ponctualité de l'instant est un mythe, une métaphore spatiale ou mécanique, un concept métaphysique hérité ou tout cela à la fois, si le présent de la présence à soi n'est pas *simple*, s'il se constitue dans une synthèse originaire et irréductible, alors toute l'argumentation de Husserl est menacée en son principe. (*VP*, p. 68)

> [If the punctuality of the instant is a myth, a spatial or mechanical metaphor, an inherited metaphysical concept, or all at once, and if the present of self-presence is not *simple*, if it is constituted in a primordial and irreducible synthesis, the whole of Husserl's argumentation is threatened in its very principle (*SP*, p. 61)]

Despite the fact that Husserl constantly refers back to the 'archi-forme' of the punctual 'now', it is his own descriptions, Derrida argues, which radically delocalize the notion of a simple identity to self of the present. We realise very quickly, that for Husserl the presence of the present does not appear as such except as a composite which accommodates a non-present and a non-perception. Memory and anticipation (retention and protension) contaminate originally the presence of the lived experience. Once this contamination is admitted the form of the present can no longer maintain itself:

> Dès lors qu'on admet cette continuité du maintenant et du non-maintenant, de la perception et de la non-perception dans la zone d'originarité commune à l'impression originaire et à la rétention, on accueille l'autre dans l'identité à soi de l'*Augenblick:* la non-présence et l'inévidence dans le *clin d'œil de l'instant.* (*VP*, p. 73)

> [As soon as we admit this continuity of the now and the not-now, perception

> and nonperception, in the zone of primordiality common to primordial impression and primordial retention, we admit the other into the self-identity of the *Augenblick*; nonpresence and nonevidence are admitted into the *blink of the instant* (*SP*, p. 65)]

This non-presence or alterity can no longer be considered as something that interrupts an already constituted present. It contaminates originally; that is to say, we cannot even think of the present before the possibility of this contamination. There *is* no present.[14] It is this compositional structure of the present 'now' which, Derrida argues 'entame en sa racine l'argument de l'inutilité du signe dans le rapport à soi' (*VP*, p. 74) [strikes at the very root of the argument for the uselessness of signs in the self-relation (*SP*, p. 66)]. While the metaphysical presuppositions of his phenomenology force Husserl to maintain on one level of his discourse the purity of the 'now' through the exclusion of the 'indicative' from the expression of meaning in the soliloquy, another level of his discourse overturns this self-identity. The originary contamination of the punctual 'now' by non-presence indicates the essential impossibility of excluding the 'indicative' from absolute self-presence. There is, therefore, no presence which has not from the very beginning already been dislocated by the 'indicative'. 'Est-ce-que cela ne compromet pas l'usage que Husserl veut faire du concept de "vie solitaire de l'âme" et par suite le partage rigoureux entre l'indication et l'expression?' (*VP*, p. 76) [Does this not compromise the usage Husserl wants to make of the concept of 'solitary mental life', and consequently of the rigorous separation of indication from expression? (*SP*, p. 68)], asks Derrida.

The 'now' is not itself. The 'now' does not appear as such except on the basis of a movement of differentiation, and it is this movement which, Derrida proposes, must be thought of as 'originary'. The present (or what *appears* as the present) is not the 'origin' but is a re-presentation that is preceded by no present. 'Différance' or 'espacement' has an absolute priority: 'Dans toutes ces directions, la présence du présent est pensée à partir du pli du retour, du mouvement de la répétition et non l'inverse' (*VP*, p. 76) [In all these directions, the presence of the present is thought of as arising from the bending back of a return, from the movement of repetition, and not the reverse (*SP*, p. 68)]. It is, therefore, this structure of temporality, revealed and then dissimulated in Husserl's analyses, which threatens the identity of self-presence in the phenomenological soliloquy. But since, Derrida argues, 'time' has never been thought except on the basis of the present, we are no longer, strictly speaking, dealing with 'time':

> Est-ce que [...] tout ce qui s'annonce dans cette réduction à la 'vie solitaire de l'âme' [...] n'est pas comme fissuré dans sa possibilité par ce qui se nomme le temps? Par ce qui se nomme le temps et à quoi il faudrait donner un autre titre, le 'temps' ayant toujours désigné un mouvement pensé à partir du présent et ne pouvant pas dire autre chose. (*VP*, p. 77)

> [does not everything that is announced already in this reduction to 'solitary mental life' [...] appear to be stricken in its very possibility by what we are calling time? But what we are calling time must be given a different name — for 'time' has always designated a movement conceived in terms of the present, and can mean nothing else (*SP*, p. 68)]

With a 'time' which is thought from the displacement of the priority of the 'now' we are approaching the 'time' of 'dissémination'. But we are not there yet, and we are yet to see how the name 'Mallarmé' becomes an essential reference in this movement. Before attempting to locate Mallarmé in Derrida's discourse, it will be necessary first of all to see how the insights of *La Voix et le phénomène* relate to Derrida's comments on the end of the 'Livre' at the beginning of *De la grammatologie*.

What, then, is the 'Livre', and why does Derrida talk of the 'fin du Livre'? We can begin to answer both of these questions by looking at the way in which Derrida picks up on the work of *La Voix et le phénomène* in 'La Fin du livre et le commencement de l'écriture'. If we weigh our words carefully, we can say that the end of the 'Livre' is a historical possibility. We must weigh our words because for Derrida there is an essential bond between the 'Livre' and the concept of history. To say that the 'Livre' is negotiating its end (or closure) is to say that a certain conception of history is also being displaced. For Derrida, the unity of the 'Livre' is assured by the same metaphysical presuppositions that have always privileged the voice and debased writing.[15] At the beginning of *De la grammatologie*, he writes:

> Le système du 's'entendre-parler' à travers la substance phonique — qui *se donne* comme signifiant non-extérieur, non-mondain, donc non empirique ou non-contingent — a dû dominer pendant toute une époque l'histoire du monde, a même produit l'idée de monde. (*DG*, p. 17)
>
> [The system of 'hearing (understanding) oneself-speak' through the phonic substance — which *presents itself* as the non-exterior, non-mundane, therefore non-empirical or non-contingent signifier — has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world (*OG*, p. 7)]

Husserl's exclusion of the 'indicative' from the phenomenological soliloquy was, according to Derrida's reading, an attempt to exclude or reduce the necessity of the sign from the moment of truth or meaning. The purely 'expressive' sign, because it implies no movement of referral, but rather the self-presence of meaning, was not strictly speaking a sign. The epoch of the *phonè* is, for Derrida, the epoch that believes it can exclude the movement of signification from the moment of truth. The voice is privileged because self-presence maintains its purity in the element of the voice, and so Derrida perceives a massive structural solidarity between the epoch of truth as presence and the metaphysical privilege accorded to the voice: 'le phonocentricsme se confonde avec la détermination historiale du sens de l'être en général comme *présence*' (*DG*, p. 23) [phonocentrism merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as *presence* (*OG*, p. 12)]. If it were seen, however, that the moment of truth cannot pre-exist the movement of signification, if truth (as presence) cannot maintain its purity but is contaminated originally, if it begins to appear that the present is constituted by the movement of an archi-writing, then a decisive shift is taking place, the consequences of which are, for Derrida, enormous.

1.2. The End of the Book

The first chapter of *De la grammatologie* attempts, therefore, to do two things which, drawing on Derrida's analyses of Husserl in *La Voix et le phénomène*, will structure the entire argument of the book. Firstly, to indicate that phonocentrism is essentially bound to a certain conception of the sign which has never been thought of except in relation to presence as the ultimate guarantor of truth; and secondly, to suggest that a displacement is taking place which is dislocating this privilege and which is reworking, from the interior, the concept of the sign. The end of the 'Livre' refers to the end of the metaphysical comprehension of the sign, and the beginning of 'écriture' to the movement which reworks this comprehension, displacing the sign from its anchoring in presence. When Derrida opens *La Dissémination* by saying that 'Ceci (donc) n'aura pas été un livre', he is making, therefore, an extraordinary claim. He is saying that *this* work will not submit to the privilege of presence, that *this* work will take account of the originary contamination of presence by the sign which cannot be excluded from the moment of truth. But we still do not know how the epoch which determines the sign in this way can come to an 'end'.

Despite the title of the chapter, Derrida says that this epoch does not simply come to an 'end'. We do not pass unproblematically from one state of affairs to another. All of the concepts with which the West articulates its discourse are determined by the unquestioned credit extended to the centrality of presence. The 'sign' means nothing but re-presentation. A 'sign' which is not articulated according to the form of presence is not really a 'sign'. Derrida proposes, therefore, a kind of textual labour which inhabits the old names, analysing the presuppositions which have accompanied their articulation, so that they can, through this labour of de-construction, begin to be rethought and re-inscribed differently. He suggests, instead of 'end', the word 'closure', which describes better the unique historical moment in which he is working. 'Closure' implies that the end of the 'Livre' is not something which simply happens when we pass on to something new, but something which must be negotiated and minutely analysed.

But if discourse has been so fundamentally determined, the question must arise as to how we can even catch sight of this closure, and how any movement 'beyond' it could be considered at all. The answer that Derrida gives is that the epoch of the 'Livre' has been exhausted; it has reached its limit. This is perhaps most explicitly stated at the end of *La Voix et le phénomène*. I will quote the passage at length:

> En ce sens, *à l'intérieur* de la métaphysique de la présence, de la philosophie comme savoir de la présence de l'objet, comme être-auprès-de-soi du savoir dans la conscience, nous croyons tout simplement au savoir absolu comme *clôture* sinon comme fin de l'histoire. Nous y croyons littéralement. *Et qu'une telle clôture a eu lieu*. L'histoire de l'être comme présence, comme présence à soi dans le savoir absolu, comme conscience (de) soi dans l'infinité de la parousie, cette histoire est close. L'histoire de la présence est close, car 'histoire' n'a jamais voulu dire que cela: présentation (*Gegenwärtigung*) de l'être, production et recueillement de l'étant dans la présence, comme savoir et maitrise. Puisque la présence pleine a *vocation* d'infinité comme présence absolue à soi-même dans la con-science, l'accomplissement du savoir absolu est la fin de l'infini qui ne

peut être que l'unité du concept, du logos et de la conscience dans une voix sans différance. *L'histoire de la métaphysique est le vouloir-s'entendre-parler absolu*. Cette histoire est close [...]. (*VP*, p. 115)

[In this sense, *within* the metaphysics of presence, within philosophy as knowledge of the presence of the object, as the being-before-oneself of knowledge in consciousness, we believe, quite simply and literally, in absolute knowledge as the *closure* if not the end of history. And we believe *that such a closure has taken place*. The history of being as presence, as self-presence in absolute knowledge, as consciousness of self in the infinity of *parousia* — this history is closed. The history of presence is closed, for 'history' has never meant anything but the presentation (*Gegenwärtigung*) of Being, the production and recollection of beings in presence, as knowledge and mastery. Since absolute self-presence in con-sciousness is the infinite *vocation* of full presence, the achievement of absolute knowledge is the end of the infinite, which could only be the unity of the concept, logos, and consciousness in a voice without *differance. The history of metaphysics is the unfolding of an absolute will-to-hear-oneself-speak*. This history is closed [...] (*SP*, p. 102)]

I have cut this quotation off at a decisive point; the rest of the paragraph will be of interest as we come to integrate Mallarmé into this 'histoire'. In the section of the quotation given above, Derrida states what may be considered as the nexus of his argument. The 'end' or the 'closure' of history is the thought of presence as absolute knowledge. Absolute knowledge as proximity of self to self in consciousness — the reduction of differance in the *parousia* of self-consciousness achieved in the voice.[16] It is the accomplishment of absolute knowledge as self-consciousness which closes history and closes the book.[17]

And then there is the statement emphasized in the text: '*une telle clôture a eu lieu*'. This closure has taken place and it is on this basis that we can begin to consider 'ce qui "commence" [...] "au-delà" du savoir absolu' (*DG*, p. 41) [that which 'begins' [...] 'beyond' absolute knowledge (*OG*, p. 26)].

Let us return for a moment to the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*, and ask, once again, what is happening here. In the reading given in Chapter 3, we saw how Mallarmé contrived to write a poem in which all reference beyond the poem itself is checked and the movement of referral returned onto the poem itself. It becomes an allegory of itself because the other to which it refers in the movement of allegory is none other than itself. This folding back on itself was achieved through the agency of a mirror and the subject of the poem, if we can still talk in these terms, is nothing but the poem's own self-reflexivity. It was suggested that the exclusion of anything external to the poem itself was reconsidered in *Igitur* in terms of an abolition of chance and that, in fact, *Igitur* was an attempt to analyse, from another perspective, the success or failure of Mallarmé's new poetics to achieve this exclusion. The poetic Absolute which Mallarmé began to consider through his work on *Hérodiade* would correspond to the self-sufficiency of the work. At this stage, I would like to pick up on a couple of aspects of the reading in Chapter 3 in order to argue that the Absolute thus considered coordinates strongly with the 'end' or 'closure' of the 'Livre' as it is articulated in Derrida's discourse. If this can be proved then we are getting very close to situating Mallarmé in the enigmatic place of transition between 'la fin du livre et le commencement de l'écriture'.

In Chapter 3, I quoted Marchal from his *Lecture de Mallarmé* where he says that:

> le sonnet est allégorique de lui-même jusqu'en cette apothéose stellaire, puisque en une réflexion ultime et totalisante le poème idéalement apparu sur le miroir sous la forme du septuor est en fait le poème déjà écrit; le poème signifié apparait comme le poème signifiant.[18]
>
> [the sonnet is allegoric of itself up to and including this stellar apotheosis, since, in a final and totalising reflection, the poem which has ideally appeared on the mirror in the form of a septuor is in fact the poem that has already been written; the signified poem appears as the signifier poem]

This reading in which the interest of the poem lies in the reduction of difference between signifier and signified is not in any sense idiosyncratic, but has, in fact, become something of a vulgate. It becomes most apparent when commentators come to discuss the signifier 'ptyx'. Ellen Burt writes for example: 'In a sense one can say that the *ptyx* reflects nothing more than itself. It is fully adequate to itself in that its only referent is itself, in that signifier and signified are one and the same, in that what it names is exactly itself';[19] and Deirdre Reynolds: 'Le 'ptyx' est un objet mystérieux dont on a longtemps cherché le sens, mais dont de nombreux critiques conviennenet maintenant qu'il s'agit avant tout du mot 'ptyx' lui-même' [The 'ptyx' is a mysterious object for which we have long looked for the meaning, but many critics now agree is first of all the word 'ptyx' itself].[20] Why is this self-identity of the word, the reduction of difference between signifier and signified, important? How could it lead Mallarmé to the extravagant claims from his correspondence in the post-*Hérodiade* period of crisis encountered in Chapter 2? I will answer these questions by referring again to the phenomenological soliloquy analysed by Derrida in *La Voix et le phénomène*.

We saw above that through the history of metaphysics, the voice was privileged over writing because in the voice we encounter the possibility of an absolute proximity between the subject and the meaning of his words. As opposed to writing which requires the passage through exteriority, the voice, when it is addressed to the self in soliloquy, seems to be able to circumvent the necessity of inscription in an exterior element. In another description of this proximity, Derrida writes:

> Idéalement, dans l'essence téléologique de la parole, il serait donc possible que le signifiant soit absolument proche du signifié visé par l'intuition et guidant le vouloir-dire. Le signifiant deviendrait parfaitement diaphane en raison même de la proximité absolue du signifié. Cette proximité est rompue lorsque, au lieu de m'entendre parler, je me vois écrire ou signifier par gestes. (*VP*, p. 90)
>
> [Ideally, in the teleological essence of speech, it would then be possible for the signifier to be in absolute proximity to the signified aimed at in intuition and governing meaning. The signifier would then become perfectly diaphanous due to the absolute proximity of the signified. This proximity is broken when, instead of hearing myself speak, I see myself write or gesture (*SP*, p. 80)]

And then in *De la grammatologie:*

> C'est à partir de ce schéma qu'il faut entendre la voix. Son système requiert qu'elle soit immédiatement entendue de celui qui l'émet. Elle produit un signifiant qui semble ne pas tomber dans le monde, hors de l'idéalité du signifié

> [...] Elle ne tombe pas dans l'extériorité de l'espace et dans ce qu'on appelle le monde, qui n'est rien d'autre que le dehors de la voix. Dans la parole dite 'vive', l'extériorité spatiale du signifiant parait absolument réduite. (*DG*, p. 236)
>
> [One must understand speech in terms of this schema. Its system requires that it be heard and understood immediately by whoever emits it. It produces a signifier which seems not to fall into the world, outside the ideality of the signified [...] It does not fall into the exteriority of space, into what one calls the world, which is nothing but the outside of speech. Within so-called "living" speech, the spatial exteriority of the signifier seems absolutely reduced (*OG*, p. 166)]

Are we then saying that Mallarmé's work on *Hérodiade* and the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*, then commented on in *Igitur*, all indicate an understanding of the Absolute as self-proximity in soliloquy? And that this can be understood as the apotheosis of the art-historical development finding *parousia* in the self-presence of the voice? That, in short, the self-identity of the poetics Mallarmé here envisages is the end of the 'Livre'? The answer to all of these questions is, emphatically, yes. Before going on to look at the radical disruption that erupts from this closure, I would like to forestall two objections, the first of which would run as follows: if this is the case, how is it possible to account for the fact that all of Mallarmé's works to which I have here made reference are unmistakably 'written'? In order to counter this objection, I would make two related points.

Firstly, I would like to recall the privilege accorded to poetry by Hegel in his *Aesthetics*. Poetry, it was seen, enjoyed a position unique amongst all forms of artistic expression. It was positioned by Hegel at the very end of the art-historical progress, right at the moment of art's dissolution, only because it is essentially bound to the voice. The voice is sound become word. As sound, it, like music, enjoys a privileged access to the inner life of the subject, but unlike music, its meaning is independent of the mode of its expression. Unlike music, Hegel says:

> sound, the last external material which poetry keeps, is in poetry no longer the feeling of sonority itself, but a *sign*, by itself void of significance, a sign of the idea which has become concrete in itself, and not merely of indefinite feeling and its nuances and gradations. Sound in this way becomes a *word* as a voice inherently articulated, the meaning of which is to indicate ideas and thoughts. (*Aesthetics*, I, 88)

Sound, when it has become word is therefore no longer strictly speaking exterior as it is with music which cannot do without its external manifestation. In Derrida's terms, the signifier is discounted because, due to the absolute proximity of the signified, it is perfectly diaphanous. Poetry is able to reduce the sensuous mode of expression which has constituted the artwork and in this way become the site of a general dissolution of art's internal limit. So, Hegel continues:

> Poetry is the universal art of the spirit which has become free in itself and which is not tied down for its realisation to external sensuous material; instead it launches out exclusively in the inner space and the inner time of ideas and feelings. (*Aesthetics*, I, 89)

The essence of poetry is therefore the voice and not the written document. It is

not the voice which is used to communicate with another, but the inner voice which communicates with the self, so poetry can even do without being expressed sonorously, it can dispense completely with its sensuous medium which would imply communication with an outside. In its essence, poetry 'launches out exclusively in the inner space and inner time of ideas and feelings'. Poetry is the soliloquy of the inner voice.

The second point, therefore, refers to the directive which Mallarmé gave to Cazalis when he sent him the first version of the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*: 'En se laissant aller murmurer plusieurs fois on éprouve une sensation assez cabalistique'. This poem is not to be taken as a written document, even if that is how it arrives. The poet himself has vacated the scene (gone to the Styx), and left the possibility of an immediate communication with the self, referring the one who reads to nothing outside of the immediate proximity of his own voice in soliloquy.[21] This, in any case, would be the ideal.

The second objection might be formulated as follows: if Mallarmé's conception of the Absolute is the self-presence of the living voice in the soliloquy, why does Igitur's act through which it is accomplished take the form of a suicide? How can the Absolute of the living voice be achieved through death? Derrida provides an answer to this question at the end of the quotation from *La Voix et le phénomène* which was cut off above. In these last lines he writes: 'Cette histoire est close quand cet absolu infini s'apparait comme sa propre mort. *Une voix sans différance, une voix sans écriture est à la fois absolument vive et absolument morte*' (*VP*, p. 115) [This history is closed when this infinite absolute appears to itself as its own death. *A voice without differance, a voice without writing, is at once absolutely alive and absolutely dead* (*SP*, p. 102)].

The poetic ideal, the Absolute of literature, is envisaged by Mallarmé as the reduction of the difference between signified and signifier in the self-presence of the living voice. We have seen, in the course of the last three chapters that this Absolute is considered in terms of an elimination of chance. The exclusion of the contingent from the work is the reduction of the movement of reference which is the reduction of the sign in the establishment of the self-presence of meaning. In the reading of the *Sonnet* in Chapter 3 we began to ask whether, despite appearances, this purification of the work has in fact been accomplished. The question arises as to whether Mallarmé's work has touched a limit, what the nature of this limit is, and what announces itself as the 'beyond' of this limit. Mallarmé's work is important for Derrida precisely because it testifies to an experience of this limit. On the one hand, Mallarmé understands the horizon of the absolute work as the reduction of reference and the establishment of presence without differece: 'Révélateur du Minuit, il n'a jamais alors indiqué pareille conjuncture, car voici l'unique heure qu'il ait créée [...] à l'heure unie, faire le present absolu des choses' [Revealer of Midnight, it has never before indicated such a conjunction, for here is the unique hour it has created [...] at the unified hour produce the absolute present of things],[22] but on the other, closing down this horizon, he explodes the myth of a pure presence: 'en raison d'un événement toujours que j'expliquerai, il n'est pas de Présent, non — un présent n'existe pas' [due to an event that still I will explain, there is no Present, no — a present does not exist].[23] It is because of the difference between these two theses, that

is, the difference between non-difference and *différance*, that we can precisely situate Mallarmé's text. It operates a kind of passage between the 'end' of the Livre and the 'beginning' of writing ('la fin du livre e(s)t le commencement de l'écriture').[24] But since the Livre is nothing but the repression of writing, the reduction of the non-origin of differance to presence, the words 'end' and 'beginning' have to be considered as suspect. Interrogating this limit Mallarmé's text works towards a lifting of the repression and the liberation of originary 'writing'. The movement of a text which escapes from the law of the Livre, which is no longer bound by the horizon of presence, but acknowledges the irreducibility of an originary *espacement* or *différance*, is named by Derrida 'dissémination'.[25]

For Derrida, the passage from the Livre to 'writing' implies a reinscription of the concept of mimesis which has always been interpreted, he says, in relation to presence. Derrida's reading of Mallarmé begins, therefore, by questioning the relationship between 'littérature' and truth, and by working towards a reconsideration of the concept of mimesis.

2. The Sessions

2.1. Mimesis (The First Session)

The first of the two sessions dedicated to the Mallarmean text in *La Dissémination* is, for the most part, engaged in the analysis of Mallarmé's short prose piece *Mimique*. *Mimique* was first published in 1886, before being included in modified form in the 'Crayonné au théâtre' section of *Divagations* when it was published in 1897. The text describes the scene of a mime. The 'pretext' for *Mimique* was the 'livret', published by Mallarmé's cousin Paul Margueritte, which itself describes the scene of a mime performed by Margueritte in 1881. Mallarmé himself may or may not have been present at this performance, but *Mimique*, in any case responds to the recent republication of the 'livret' which had first appeared in 1882. The complex history leading to the composition of the text is an important aspect of the first 'session', and Derrida enters into considerable detail on this subject in order to complicate the notion that *Mimique* could have any self-identical referent situated outside, before, or beyond the text.[26]

Derrida's reading is minute and intricate. In his analysis he seeks to demonstrate that the text is calculated to disrupt the logical order of mimesis which would always place the imitated in a secure position of self-presence *before* the intervention of re-presentation which, in this order, would come second. In Derrida's reading, *Mimique* destroys this order by overturning the privilege accorded to presence and setting up a structure in which there is still representation but in which it is now an originary movement which in the last resort is not authorised by any presence. *Mimique* is, for Derrida, an exemplary moment of the Mallarméan corpus because it enacts the displacement of presence and, in its movement, escapes the authority of the Livre. In this reading the 'action'/operation of the mime, which is the subject of *Mimique*, describes the movement of textuality itself when it is no longer bound to presence. And since, as Derrida is at pains to demonstrate, *Mimique* refers to nothing except itself, its only subject is the movement of the text that it is. It describes itself

as the scene of the generation of 'meaning' when 'meaning' is not ultimately bound by the horizon of truth as presence.

The Interpretation of Mimesis

The first 'session' opens with a page on which there is a quotation from Plato's *Philebus* which, Derrida says, illustrates the system of mimesis articulated by Platonism and which will be discreetly but emphatically destroyed by Mallarmé's text. *Mimique* is therefore placed in the bottom right hand corner of this same page as though to indicate from the beginning the strange relationship that Mallarmé's writings maintain with the tradition installed by the 'decision' of Platonism. In the order of *La dissémination*, this session comes straight after 'La pharmacie de Platon', an essay in which Derrida has closely analysed this 'decision', in terms of an expulsion of 'writing' from the city, by following the signifier *pharmakon* through Plato's text. This expulsion or repression of 'writing' has held throughout the history of the West, Derrida would go as far as to say that it has constituted this history. But with Mallarmé we begin to catch sight of a lifting of the repression ('Entre Platon et Mallarmé [...] une histoire a eu lieu' (*D*, p. 225) [Between Plato and Mallarmé [...] a whole history has taken place (*D**, p. 183)]). Mallarmé's text does not come on the next page as the next thing, as though we pass straight forwardly from one to the other. *Mimique*'s positioning *within* Plato's text is important because Mallarmé's writing maintains the appearance of the Platonic system of mimesis, but it is only an appearance. *Mimique*, Derrida says, simulates this system almost completely, but in the course of this simulation it displaces it absolutely. In this sense, it is both inside and outside of Platonism, occupying the tradition, only to inscribe it differently.

After an initial reading of the structure of mimesis illustrated in Plato's *Philebus*, Derrida asks the following questions:

> Or que décide et que maintient le 'platonisme', c'est-à-dire, plus ou moins immédiatement, toute l'histoire de la philosophie occidentale [...]? qu'est-ce qui décide et se maintient dans l'ontologie ou dans la dialectique à travers toutes les mutations ou révolutions qui s'y sont entrainées? (*D*, p. 235)
>
> [But what does 'Platonism' decide and maintain? ('Platonism' here standing more or less immediately for the whole history of Western philosophy) [...] what is it that is decided and maintained in ontology or dialectics throughout all the mutations and revolutions that are entailed? (*D**, p. 191)]

Derrida's answer to these questions should not now surprise us. The decision of Platonism is the decision that there is, in the last analysis, a self-present, self-identical presence. The decision is the decision for the 'ontological': that it is possible to hold a discourse on the being of what *is*: 'C'est justement l'*ontologique:* la possibilité présumée d'un discours sur ce qui *est*, d'un *logos* décidant et décidable de ou sur l'*on* (étant-présent)' (*D*, p. 235) [It is precisely *ontology*: the presumed possibility of a discourse about what is, the deciding and decidable *logos* of or about the *on* (being-present) (*D**, p. 191].

This is what Derrida means when he speaks of logocentrism; the essential possibility that a philosophy, and any discourse that it shelters (so, he would say,

all philosophy and all discourse), can ultimately justify itself because it speaks of what *is*. This is why 'La Double Séance' is interested in the relationship between 'littérature' and truth. If mimesis has always been interpreted based on this ontological 'decision', then it has always been interpreted in terms of a relationship to the truth of what is. This decision structures the logical order of mimesis:

> Ce qui est, l'étant-présent [...] se distingue de l'apparence, de l'image, du phénomène, etc. c'est-à-dire de ce qui, le présentant comme étant présent, le redouble, le re-présente et dès lors le remplace et le dé-présente. Il y à donc le 1 et le 2, le simple et le double. Le double vient *après* le simple, il le multiple *par suite*. Il s'ensuit, qu'on m'excuse de le rappeler, que l'image *survient* à la réalité, la représentation au présent en présentation, l'imitation à la chose, l'imitant à l'imité. (*D*, p. 235)
>
> [That which is, the being-present [...] is distinguished from appearance, the image, the phenomenon, etc., that is, from anything that, presenting it *as* being-present, doubles it, re-presents it, and can therefore replace and de-present it. There is thus the 1 and the 2, the simple and the double. The double comes *after* the simple; it multiplies it as a *follow-up*. It follows, I apologise for repeating this, that the image *supervenes* upon reality, the representation upon the present in presentation, the imitation upon the thing, the imitator upon the imitated (*D**, p. 191)]

Derrida excuses himself for recalling this here because it is, of course, patently obvious. It would be clearly absurd to attempt to reverse this order if that simply meant placing the 2 before the 1. As we have seen, deconstruction does not operate a simple reversal, it says that the 1 is always inhabited by the 2 and cannot therefore maintain its purity. It moves towards a generalization of the 2 which destroys the possibility of the self-identity of the 1. This order is not only logical, it also installs a hierarchy: 'il va de soi, selon la 'logique' même, selon une synonymie profonde, l'imité est plus réel, plus essentiel, plus vrai, etc., que l'imitant. Il lui est antérieur et supérieur' (*D*, p. 236) [obviously, according to 'logic' itself, according to a profound synonymy, what is imitated is more real, more essential, more true, etc., than what imitates. It is anterior and superior to it (*D**, p. 191)]. Even Heidegger's discourse does not escape from this order. At least while it remains an ontology. When he seeks to return to a more originary disclosure of being, obscured by the history of metaphysics which has forgotten the difference between being and beings, he still articulates his discourse in relation to truth as presence. The movement of unveiling through which he interprets the pre-Socratic understanding of *aletheia* does not, for Derrida, constitute the radical break with metaphysics which is claimed. He distances his discourse from an understanding of truth as *adaequatio*, only to reaffirm all the more insistently the presence of what presents itself. When mimesis is understood as an originary process of unveiling, and cannot be so easily translated by 'imitation', it is still held by the logical order of ontology. So Derrida concludes his summary of the philosophical interpretation of mimesis, writing:

> Chaque fois, la *mimesis* doit suivre le procès de la vérité. Sa norme, son ordre, sa loi, c'est la présence du présent. C'est au nom de la vérité, sa seule référence — *la référence* — qu'elle est jugée, proscrite ou prescrite selon une alternance réglée.

Le trait invariant de cette référence dessine la clôture de la métaphysique: non pas comme un espace homogène mais selon une figure non-circulaire, tout autre. (*D*, p. 238)

[In each case, *mimesis* has to follow the process of truth. The presence of the present is its norm, its order, its law. It is in the name of truth, its only reference — *reference* itself — that *mimesis* is judged, proscribed or prescribed according to a regular alternation.

The invariable feature of this reference sketches out the closure of metaphysics: not as a border enclosing some homogeneous space but according to a noncircular, entirely other figure (*D**, p. 193)]

The Mime as Originary Writing

La scène n'illustre que l'idée, pas une action effective, dans un hymen (d'où procède le Rêve), vicieux mais sacré, entre le désir et l'accomplissement, la perpétration et son souvenir: ici devançant, la remémorant, au futur, au passé, *sous une apparence fausse de présent*. Telle opère le Mime, dont le jeu se borne à une allusion perpétuelle sans briser la glace: il installe, ainsi, un milieu, pur, de fiction. (Stéphane Mallarmé)[27]

[The scene illustrates but the idea, not any actual action, in a hymen (out of which flows Dream), tainted with vice yet sacred, between desire and fulfilment, perpetration and remembrance: here anticipating, there recalling, in the future, in the past, *under the false appearance of a present*. That is how the Mime operates, whose act is confined to a perpetual allusion without breaking the ice or mirror: he thus sets up a medium, a pure medium, of fiction]

For the most part, Derrida's commentary orbits around the 'quotation' given above, which Mallarmé grafts into the centre of the second paragraph of *Mimique*. This quotation is not to be found anywhere — it does not have an 'original' but belongs to the Mallarmean 'fiction'.

Reading the beginning of this quotation, Derrida indicates the possibility of an 'idealist' interpretation of *Mimique*. The mime, according to this reading, does not represent anything that might have taken place in the world, no 'actual action', but it still represents the 'idea'. The scene of representation would still be comprehensible within the traditional interpretation of mimesis. When the idea is not the formal being of the thing as it appears (Plato), it is 'disons de manière post-cartésienne, la copie en moi, la représentation pensée de la chose, l'idéalité de l'étant *pour* un sujet' (*D*, p. 239) [to speak in a post-Cartesian manner, the copy inside me, the representation of the thing through thought, the ideality — *for* a subject — of what is (*D**, p. 194)]. In either case, we are still in the space of the Platonic 'decision' and the ultimate reference of *Mimique* is the self-identity of the 'idea' (we saw in Chapters 2 and 3 why such a reading might impose itself):

Certes. On peut lire ainsi le texte de Mallarmé et le réduire à un brillant idéalisme littéraire. L'usage fréquent du mot *Idée,* souvent agrandi et en apparence hypostasié d'une majuscule, l'histoire du prétendu hégélianisme de l'auteur semblent en effet y inviter. Et l'on a rarement omis de répondre à l'invitation. (*D*, p. 239)

> [Of course. Mallarmé's text can be read in this way and reduced to a brilliant literary idealism. The frequent use of the word *Idea* — often enlarged and hypostatised by a capital letter — and the story of the author's supposed Hegelianism tend to invite such a reading. And the invitation has rarely gone unanswered (*D*★, p. 194)]

But to respond to this invitation would be to fall into a trap. Such a reading would be blinded by appearances — carrying the metaphysical baggage of a whole history of interpretation, it would fail to notice that something else is going on in this text. It would fail to take account of the operation of the mime which decouples *Mimique* from this history: 'la *Mimique* se lit tout autrement que comme un néo-idéalisme ou un néo-mimétologisme. Le système de l'*illustration* y est tout autre que celui du *Philèbe*' (*D*, p. 239) [*Mimique* can be read quite differently than as a neo-idealism or a neo-mimetologism. The system of *illustration* is altogether different there than in the *Philebus* (*D*★, p. 194)].

It seems, then, that the mime does not imitate anything, 'pas une action effective', and Derrida notes that this evacuation of any referent is insistently recalled, at the beginning of the second paragraph, for example: 'Ainsi ce PIERROT ASSASSIN DE SA FEMME composé et rédigé par lui-même, soliloque muet' [Such is this PIERROT MURDERER OF HIS WIFE composed and set down by himself, a mute soliloquy]. There is no present preceding the text: 'Aucun présent n'aura précédé ni surveillé le tracement de son écriture' (*D*, p. 239) [No present has preceded or supervised the tracing of his writing (*D*★, p. 194)], writes Derrida. And a little later:

> rédigeant et composant lui-même son soliloque, le traçant sur la page blanche qu'il est, le Mime ne se laisse dicter son texte depuis aucun autre lieu. Il ne représente rien, n'imite rien, n'a pas à se conformer à un référent antérieur dans un dessein d'adéquation ou de vraisemblance. (*D*, p. 253)

> [setting down and composing by himself his soliloquy, tracing it upon the white page he himself is, the Mime does not allow his text to be dictated to him from any other place. He represents nothing, imitates nothing, does not have to conform to any prior referent with the aim of achieving adequation or verisimilitude (*D*★, p. 205)]

The mime is not, therefore, to be comprehended through an interpretation of mimesis in which it is comfortably translated by 'imitation'. The mime does not imitate anything and *Mimique* does not belong to that schema of truth/representation. If this interpretation is checked, then, Derrida suggests, we might still try to capture the operation of the mime in an ontological interpretation. '[S]elon une alternance réglée,' the objection would run, '[...] puisqu'il entame en son origine cela même qu'il trace, présent ou produit, il est le mouvement même de la vérité' (*D*, p. 254) [according to a regulated alternation [...] since it initiates in its origin the very thing that it traces, presents or produces, it is the movement of truth itself (*D*★, p. 205)]. This would be the Heideggerian appropriation: 'Non plus, certes, de la vérité d'adéquation entre la représentation et le présent de la chose même, ou entre l'imitant et l'imité, mais de la vérité comme dévoilement présent du présent: monstration, manifestation, production, *aletheia*' (*D*, p. 254) [Not, of course, truth in the form of adequation between the representation and the present

of the thing itself, or between imitator and imitated, but truth as the present unveiling of the present: monstration, manifestation, production, *aletheia* (*D**, p. 205–06)]. If there is not representation in terms of imitation of some referent pre-existing the text itself, then there must be presentation. In this way, we would go beyond the interpretation of mimesis which places it in relation to truth through resemblance, towards a more 'originary' understanding of truth (*aletheia* according to the Heideggerian interpretation), and by this same token, Derrida says, a more 'originary' understanding of *mimeisthai*. This is the second of the metaphysical interpretations of mimesis which Derrida considered earlier in the essay. It is in countering this movement of appropriation that Derrida's reading of *Mimique* steps beyond the closure of metaphysics. If all imitation had been vacated from the text of *Mimique*, then this second interpretation of the text in terms of an originary presentation would indeed be legitimate, but, despite appearances, there is still an effect of imitation. *Mimique* is situated strangely 'between' the two schemas, there is an originary movement of presentation, but this only takes place through a re-presentation which cannot be reduced or excluded. Here is the decisive gesture:

> *Il y a* une mimique. Mallarmé y tient, comme au simulacre [...] Nous sommes devant une mimique qui n'imite rien, devant, si l'on peut dire, un double qui ne redouble aucun simple, que rien ne prévient, rien qui ne soit en tout cas déjà un double. (*D*, p. 254)

> [*There is* mimicry. Mallarmé sets great store by it, along with simulacrum [...] We are faced then with mimicry imitating nothing; faced, so to speak, with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not itself already a double (*D**, p. 206)]

Before going on to look at the broader consequences of this unusual mimetic effect, produced as *Mimique* displaces the Platonic interpretation of mimesis, let us look briefly at the way in which the reading is justified. In order to advance in this reading, Derrida argues that the text of *Mimique* maintains two gestures which would be contradictory in any traditional understanding of representation. On the one hand, the mime inaugurates. As we have just seen, the mime does not refer to any action which has preceded its own movement. On the other hand, however, the mime still represents. To support this contention, Derrida draws attention to the operation of the mime as it is described at the end of the fictional quotation given above: 'Tel opère le Mime, dont le jeu se borne à une allusion perpétuelle sans briser la glace' [That is how the Mime operates, whose act is confined to a perpetual allusion without breaking the ice or mirror]. The mime, therefore, alludes, it represents, but it represents nothing. Each of these gestures disqualifies the resolution of mimesis which the other would authorize. Maintaining both gestures, the operation of the mime sets up a structure or a schema in which there is representation, but representation of nothing which pre-exists its own movement of writing. It installs what Mallarmé calls 'un milieu, pur, de fiction', and this, for Derrida, can only be understood as an 'originary' writing. We saw above that when Mallarmé vacates his text of all external reference ('en raréfiant la glace jusqu'à une pureté inouïe', *Igitur*, in *OC*, p. 441), when there is no representation of anything external to the work itself, he discovers a scene of originary representation. Derrida's

reading of *Mimique* attempts to show how this strange discovery is articulated in the Mallarmean text, how the movement of originary representation is described by the text itself.

The 'milieu' is, indeed, a 'mi-lieu'. It is this inbetween place which the mime installs and maintains in its 'soliloque muet'. Derrida's reading refers to what he calls 'L'"ENTRE" DE MALLARMÉ' (also 'L'ANTRE DE MALLARMÉ' and 'L'ENTRE DEUX "MALLARMÉ"'). This 'entre/antre' is precisely the space of fiction when it is understood as an inaugural writing, and this milieu is maintained through the 'undecidable' mark of the hymen which does not permit the text to close down on any traditional understanding of mimesis but instead works to maintain the opening of the text as a space of originary referral. The signifier 'hymen' is undecidable, firstly because, Derrida says, it can mean both consummation (that is to say, identity, because it means marriage), and difference, that is, it is a barrier which separates (the hymen as a membrane). Because it can mean both of these things at once, and because the economy of Mallarmé's text does not permit either understanding of the word to dominate, the hymen suspends any ultimate decision as to its meaning. So, secondly, but most importantly, the hymen becomes a syntactical element of the text which holds it open and causes infinite problems for criticism in search of an ultimate meaning or reference.[28] In *Mimique* the scene takes place in this hymen ('dans un hymen'), which means, for Derrida, that the mime's actions are not the manifestation of a presence as *aletheia*, and not a representation of something that happened before.

In *Mimique* we read that the milieu of the mime, the milieu of fiction is situated 'entre le désir et l'accomplissement, la perpétration et son souvenir: ici devançant, la remémorant, au futur, au passé, *sous une apparence fausse de présent*' (*OC*, p. 310) [between desire and fulfilment, perpetration and remembrance: here anticipating, there recalling, in the future, in the past, *under the false appearance of a present*].[29] In the framework of Derrida's reading, this non-place can now be articulated. The action of the mime ('pas une action effective') is not the accomplishment of an action taking place in the present (its 'perpétration'), nor is it the representation of an act which has already taken place and is therefore here being recalled (its 'souvenir'). What is taking place is taking place between these two registers; it is not strictly one or the other, but it is both. Because the action is never accomplished — it does not take place in a present nor has it ever taken place in a past present — it is suspended between desire and its fulfilment. What takes place through the mime does not belong to the present, but is a temporal synthesis in which future and past are implicated.[30] It does not belong to the present of the mime's actions as he produces them, neither does it belong to a past present which is here being re-enacted. What takes place may resemble a present action, but this is a trap: the mime operates '*sous une apparence fausse de present*'. There is a perpetual allusion but it never breaks the mirror ('une allusion perpétuelle, sans briser la glace'), and this, for Derrida, means that the mime's movement of referral is inaugural; it is caught up in the mirror, in the text, and it never breaks through to a signified, self-identical truth:

> L'opération qui n'appartient plus au système de la vérité ne manifeste, ne produit, ne dévoile aucune présence; elle ne constitue pas davantage une conformité de

> ressemblance ou d'adéquation entre une présence et une représentation. Ce n'est pourtant pas une unité mais le jeu multiple d'une scène qui, n'illustrant rien hors d'elle-même, parole ou acte, n'illustre rien. (*D*, p. 257)
>
> [The operation, which no longer belongs to the system of truth, does not manifest, produce, or unveil any presence; nor does it constitute any conformity, resemblance, or adequation between a presence and a representation. And yet this operation is not a unified entity but the manifold play that, illustrating nothing — neither word nor deed — beyond itself, illustrates nothing (*D**, p. 208)]

We said above that Mallarmé's text destroys the Platonic order of mimesis as it inhabits it and reinscribes it differently. It is now possible to say a little more about this displacement. *Mimique* is not the straightforward scene of an imitation. So much we have seen already. But it does resemble one. It is only when we take a closer look at the 'jeu' of the mime that we notice that it has maintained the structure of a classic scene of representation but that it has, in a decisive gesture, vacated the space of the referent. 'Le jeu joue toujours la différence sans référence, ou plutôt sans référent, sans extériorité absolue' [The game is always a play of difference without reference, or rather without referent, without an absolute exteriority], says Derrida. It is because it maintains the appearance of the classical scene that it can be taken as a 'simulation' of mimesis as it has been traditionally interpreted. It is a simulacrum of simulacra:

> Copie de copie, simulacre qui simule le simulacre platonicien, la copie de copie platonicienne aussi bien que le rideau hégélien qui ont ici perdu le leurre du référent présent et se trouvent alors perdus pour la dialectique et pour l'ontologie, perdus pour le savoir absolu. (*D*, p. 270)
>
> [A copy of a copy, a simulacrum that simulates the Platonic simulacrum — the Platonic copy of a copy as well as the Hegelian curtain have lost here the lure of the present referent and thus find themselves lost for dialectics and ontology, lost for absolute knowledge (*D**, p. 219)]

It is because Mallarmé's text enacts this simulation that it cannot be recovered by philosophy, and by extension, the criticisms that philosophy shelters. The Mallarmean break is assured because it avoids the trap of leaving imitation only so that it can be recovered by a reading in which the thing itself is presented in its self-presence. Derrida writes:

> A vouloir renverser le mimétologisme ou à prétendre lui échapper d'un coup, en sautant simplement à *pieds joints*, on retombe sûrement et immédiatement dans son système: on supprime le double ou on dialectise et on retrouve la perception de la chose même, la production de sa présence, sa vérité, comme idée, forme ou matière. (*D*, p. 255)
>
> [Any attempt to reverse mimetologism or escape it in one fell swoop by leaping out of it *with both feet* would only amount to an inevitable and immediate fall back into its system: in suppressing the double or making it dialectical, one is back in the perception of the thing itself, the production of its presence, its truth, as idea, form or matter (*D**, p. 207)]

The mime plays with the traditional interpretation of mimesis, and to this extent, it is situated within Platonism and the critical discourse that Platonism commands.

However, in its game, it elides the ultimate justification of that discourse, the very thing that that discourse cannot do without, and so it is also radically outside of Platonism. This is why Mallarmé's text is placed in the corner of the page occupied by the quotation from the *Philebus*; it is inside and outside the tradition, it works towards unpicking that tradition from its own certainties. Inside and outside the tradition, somewhere on the margin, dislocating the discourse that would attempt to master it: 'Il n'est pas donc simplement faux de dire que Mallarmé est platonicien ou hegelien. Mais ce n'est surtout pas vrai' (*D*, p. 255) [It is thus not simply false to say that Mallarmé is a Platonist or a Hegelian. But it is above all not true (*D**, p. 207)].

2.2. 'Espacement' (The Second Session)

The hymen marks the space of the 'entre'. In this space marked by the hymen we are between the presence of the action and the memory of its representation. Because it is both memory and action in the same gesture, and therefore neither the one nor the other, the mime's operation does not belong to the order of presence. This is what was discovered in the first session, and this is what is carried through into the first pages of the second session, where Derrida will go on to argue that the originary writing described by the mime tends to be neutralized by a criticism which is ill-equipped to deal with a text which, in its movement, ultimately constitutes a challenge to that same criticism. This line of argument is announced early in the second session:

> Aucun présent en vérité ne se présente, fût-ce pour s'y dissimuler. Ce que l'hymen déjoue, sous l'espèce du présent (temporel ou éternel), c'est l'assurance d'une maitrise. Le désir critique — c'est-à-dire aussi bien philosophique — ne peut, en tant que tel, que tenter de l'y reconduire. (*D*, pp. 282–83)
>
> [No present in truth presents itself there, not even in the form of its self-concealment. What the hymen undoes, outwits, under the rubric of the present (whether temporal or eternal), is the assurance of mastery. The critical desire — which is also the philosophical desire — can only, as such, attempt to regain that lost mastery (*D**, p. 230)]

With no present serving as a basis for criticism bound to the ontological interpretation of mimesis, the 'meaning' of the text must be considered differently. The traditional interpretation would have a stable, self-identical meaning, which would stop the play of the text on some ultimate signified, some semantic plenitude. In the Mallarmean text, however, it is the play of the text which is primary. The meaning is generated through the play of signifiers with no signified, of reference with no referent. It is the articulation of the text (its syntax) which counts. Traditional criticism, says Derrida, can handle a certain amount of polysemy, but it is not able to deal with a text which places no final limit on polysemy. In such a text, it is the interplay of the signifiers which produces the 'meaning'. Such a text does not mean anything, but it still means. To mean as an intransitive verb.[31]

The interplay of signifiers is regulated according to their articulation with one another, and so, Derrida frequently talks of an excess of the syntactic over the semantic. The privilege of the voice in the history of metaphysics has tended to

reduce the role of the syntactic and to promote the self-proximity of meaning as an exclusion of these elements. In Mallarmé, 'Les "blancs", en effet, assument l'importance' [The 'whites', in effect, take on significance].[32] The spacing out of the text takes on a new significance: 'le tout sans nouveauté qu'un espacement de la lecture' [everything without novelty except a spacing of reading].[33] Derrida's concern in the second session is the way in which this new importance ascribed to the spacing of the text announces a crisis for criticism: 'Nous devons déterminer la structure de l'espacement mallarméen, calculer ses effets et en tirer les conséquences *critiques*' (*D*, p. 289) [We must determine the structure of Mallarmé's spacing, calculate its effects, and deduce its *critical* consequences (*D*★, p. 236)], he writes.[34]

'Espacement' does not arrive in the text of *La Dissémination* as a new term in Derrida's vocabulary. At the very opening of *L'Écriture et la différence*, Derrida placed the quotation from the 'Préface' to *Un coup de dés* given above ('le tout sans nouveauté qu'un espacement de la lecture') as an exergue. There is also an important passage in *De la grammatologie* where he articulates his understanding of 'espacement', and Mallarmé's name is again recalled.[35] Even in Derrida's earlier works, where Mallarmé plays a less prominent role than he does in *La Dissémination*, his writing is already discreetly organizing Derrida's text.

In the second session, when 'espacement' becomes the specific focus of the essay, it is announced as the instigator of a crisis. Derrida draws on Mallarmé's essay 'Crise de vers' (as he will in the later *Tableau* piece) to suggest that the crisis of literature is a crisis produced by the reinscription of the concept of mimesis as analysed in the first session. He writes:

> Que les blancs de cet espacement et la crise de la littérature ne soient pas étrangers à la récriture d'un certain hymen, feinte d'un voile en sa déchirure fictive ou pli, *Crise de vers* nous le donne à lire, à traverser. (*D*, p. 290)
>
> [That the blanks of this spacing and the crisis of literature are not foreign to the writing of a certain hymen (the feint of a veil in its fictive tear or fold) is set out by *Crise de vers* for us to read and to traverse (*D*★, p. 237)]

The tearing or fold in the veil, with all its apocalyptic overtones, is a clear reference to the beginning of 'Crise de vers' where Mallarmé writes: 'on assiste [...] à une inquiétude du voile dans le temple avec des plis significatifs et un peu sa déchirure' [we are witnessing [...] a troubling of the veil in the temple with significant folds and a little tearing].[36] As well as linking the crisis of 'littérature' to the 'pli', the above quotation also indicates the second of the Mallarmean 'themes' which will be at issue in this session, the 'blanc'.

In the criticism of criticism that constitutes a large portion of this session, Derrida wants to demonstrate that Mallarmé commentary has tended towards a neutralization of the Mallarmean text as it has attempted to master it through an ontological interpretation of mimesis — which the first session showed to be no longer pertinent. For Derrida, there could be no better example of this attempted mastery than the treatment of the themes of the 'pli' and the 'blanc' in Richard's *L'Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*. The problem with Richard's thematic reading is precisely that it is thematic. It is the notion that it is possible to isolate a theme, the meaning of which would be stable across all its transformations, which is placed

in doubt by the textual operations of Mallarmé's writing. By 're-marking' the 'espacement' of an originary articulation, irreducible to a self-present meaning, the themes of the 'pli' and the 'blanc' undo the pretensions of thematic criticism:

> C'est donc de la possibilité de la critique thématique qu'il sera précisément question: exemple d'une critique moderne, à l'œuvre partout où l'on vise à déterminer un sens à travers un texte, à en décider, à décider qu'il est un sens, sens posé, posable ou transposable comme tel, thème. [...] Or si nous entrevoyons que le 'blanc' et le 'pli' ne peuvent être maitrisés comme thèmes ou comme sens, si c'est dans le pli et le blanc d'un certain hymen que se remarque la textualité du texte, nous aurons dessiné les limites de la critique thématique. (*D*, pp. 299–300)
>
> [What we will thus be concerned with here is the very possibility of thematic criticism, seen as an example of modern criticism, at work wherever one tries to determine a meaning through a text, to pronounce a decision upon it, to decide that this or that *is* a meaning and that it is meaningful, to say that this meaning is posed, poseable, or transposable as such: a theme. [...] Now, if we can begin to see that the 'blank' and the 'fold' cannot be mastered as themes or as meanings, if it is within the folds and the blankness of a certain hymen that the very textuality of the text is re-marked, then we will precisely have determined the limits of thematic criticism itself (*D**, p. 245–46)]

Taking the 'pli' and the 'blanc' as themes means taking them as semantic plenitudes; there would be an ideal meaning which, identical to itself, would authorize their interpretation and their communication with the other signifiers which are trapped in their orbit. If we consider the theme of the 'blanc' in Mallarmé's text, a thematic criticism would have it that all of the 'whites' in Mallarmé's text can be comprehended through the metaphorical relation that they bear to the theme of the 'blanc'. Not only the signifier 'blanc', but a whole series of terms which can be discovered across Mallarmé's text ('la virginité', 'la frigidité', 'la neige', 'le voile', 'l'aile du cynge', 'l'écume', 'le papier', etc.) are in a tropological relationship with the thematic/semantic content of the 'blanc'. This reading, however, rests on the understanding that the 'blanc' has a signified content. It prioritizes a semantic reading of the text which excludes an irreducible play of syntax.

In Derrida's reading of Mallarmé, the text has no 'meaning' which is not produced through its own articulation. There is an originary 'espacement' which dislocates the notion of a 'meaning' to which the text would refer. This 'espacement' does not appear as such, it is not a phenomenon which could present itself, but it is remarked in the text when the text refers to its own syntax: the 'pli' and the 'blanc' and all the associated signifiers. As the re-mark of the spacing of the text itself, the 'blanc' literally means nothing (*not*, however, nothing if that were taken to mean a 'significant silence'). The 'blanc' cannot become a transcendental signified, a plenitude of meaning because what it signifies is nothing but the spacing of the text, the articulation of its writing.

Because the 'blanc' means nothing in this sense, the metaphorical relation that the other terms in the series maintain with it is also infinitely complicated. If the 'blanc' re-marks the 'espacement' of the text then it cannot provide a proper thematic/semantic ground for the other signifiers that are in a metaphorical

relationship with it. While the 'blanc' enables a thematic criticism to be articulated, providing the necessary space between each of the terms in the series and therefore allowing the theme to emerge, it also destroys the semantic ground of the theme by remarking only the spacing of the text. If metaphor, as Derrida argues in 'La Mythologie blanche' (almost contemporary with 'La Double Séance'), has always been comprehended, by a rhetoric commanded by philosophy, through its ultimate relation to a semantic plenitude or proper ground, then the textual operation of the 'blanc' serves to displace the metaphysical concept of metaphor: 'La dissémination des blancs (nous ne dirons pas la blancheur) produit une structure tropologique qui circule infiniment sur elle-même par le supplément incessant d'un tour de trop: *plus* de métaphore, *plus* de métonymie' (*D*, p. 315) [The dissemination of whites (*not* the dissemination of whiteness) produces a tropological structure that circulates infinitely around itself through the incessant supplement of an extra turn: *more/no more* metaphor, *more/no more* metonym (*D**, p. 258)]. Derrida is here playing on the double meaning of the word 'plus'. There is *no more* metaphor because there is *more* metaphor. Metaphor is no longer held by the metaphysical opposition between the metaphorical and the proper, so it is no longer strictly speaking 'metaphor'. This destruction of metaphor takes place, however, through a surplus of metaphor, so there is more metaphor than rhetoric or criticism can handle.[37] Re-marking the articulation of the text, and not referring to a semantic plenitude independent of the text, the 'blanc' cannot, therefore, be mastered by a thematic criticism. The 'blanc' reverses the hierarchy which would subordinate the syntactical elements of the text. It produces an excess of syntax which reverses the order of mimesis and therefore of meaning:

> Selon un schème que nous avons éprouvé quant à 'entre', le quasi 'sens' de la dissémination, c'est l'impossible retour à l'unité rejoint, réajointée d'un sens, la marche barrée d'une telle *réflexion*. La dissémination est-elle pour autant la *perte* d'une telle vérité, l'interdiction *négative* d'accéder à un tel signifié? Loin de laisser ainsi supposer qu'une substance vierge la précède ou la surveille, se dispersant ou s'interdisant dans une négative seconde, la dissémination *affirme* la génération toujours déjà divisée du sens. (*D*, p. 326)
>
> [Following a pattern we have already experienced in the 'entre', the quasi-'meaning' of dissemination is the impossible return to the rejoined, readjusted unity of meaning, the impeded march of any such *reflection*. But is dissemination then the *loss* of that kind of truth, the *negative* prohibition of all access to such a signified? Far from presupposing that a virgin substance thus precedes or oversees it, dispersing or withholding itself in a negative second moment, dissemination *affirms* the always already divided generation of meaning (*D**, p. 268)]

In the above quotation Derrida offers a minimal definition of *dissemination*. As suggested above, it reinscribes the verb 'to mean' as an intransitive verb. The meaning of a text is not indifferent to, or independent of, the movement of the text. If the text has no referent in this sense (external and preceding it in a logical hierarchy) then the meaning of the text must be considered differently. The signifiers do not represent a signified content but the meaning is produced through their inscription and their articulation with one another. The text does not mean any*thing* and 'la dissémination *affirme* la génération toujours déjà divisée du sens'.

We come back here to the operation of the mime, which we can now better understand as the operation of the text as originary writing. Dissemination names this movement of originary writing preceded by no presence. The crisis of meaning which, at the end of 'La Double Séance' Derrida does not hesitate to coordinate with the 'Crise de vers' announced in Mallarmé's text of that name, announces a crisis of historical dimension. If, as Derrida writes at the beginning of the first session: 'le concept d'histoire n'a vécu que de la possibilité du sens, de la présence ou promesse du sens, de sa vérité' [the very concept of history has lived only upon the possibility of meaning, upon the past, present, or promised presence of meaning and of truth], then the crisis of 'littérature' calls for a reconsideration of the concept of history (in exactly the same way — and for precisely the same reasons — that the displacement of the concept of the sign was seen above to call for a reinscription of the notion of time): 'Hors de ce système on ne peut recourir au concept d'histoire qu'en le réinscrivant ailleurs, selon une stratégie spécifique et systématique' [Outside this system, it is impossible to resort to the concept of history without reinscribing it elsewhere, according to some specific systematic strategy].

3. Crisis

3.1. Or (The Sunset or The Vestige of Art)

> Jettera-t-il son or par dernières splendeurs (Hérodiade)
> [Will it scatter its gold in an ultimate splendour]

Dissemination enacts, therefore, a new economy of meaning or a new economy of the sign. It is an economy of the signifier freed from a restricted interpretation in which it refers to a meaning 'outside' the text, and reinscribes it in a general economy of textuality in which it is no longer constrained by this metaphysical presupposition: 'la dissémination interrompt la circulation qui transforme en origine un après-coup de sens' (*D*, p. 30). When Derrida speaks of the decapitation of the text or says that dissemination does not return to the father, he is speaking of this movement by which 'writing' does not submit to the authority of absolute self-presence: 'L'écriture, le hors-la-loi, le fils perdu', he writes in 'La Pharmacie de Platon'.[38] This liberation of the signifier is enacted in exemplary fashion in Mallarmé's writing, Derrida says, in both the *Tableau* piece 'Mallarmé' and in 'La Double Séance', when the signifier 'or' propagates its effects across the surface of the text.

On each of the occasions when Derrida looks at the play of 'or' he begins with the short text of that name published in the 'Grands faits divers' section of *Divagations*. The text published there is a heavily edited version of an article first published under the title 'Faits-divers' in the *National Observer* in 1893, and then again in the review *Au quartier latin* under the title 'Grisaille' in 1895. *Or*, as it appears in *Divagations* in 1897 is therefore the third version of the text to appear. The pretext for the article was the 'Panama affair', a scandal which broke in 1892 when it was discovered that the French government had taken bribes to keep quiet about the financial troubles of the Panama Canal Company. In the first of the published versions, Mallarmé

makes it clear that he is not especially interested in the facts of the case. He writes: 'A part des vérités, que le poète peut extraire et garde pour son secret, hors de l'entretien, méditant les produire, au moment opportun avec transfiguration, rien, dans cet effondrement de Panama, ne m'intéressa, par de l'éclat' [Apart from the truths that the poet is able to extract and keep in secrecy, without consultation, thinking of producing them, transfigured, at the opportune moment, nothing, of this Panama collapse, will interest me, in its radiance].[39] Between this version and *Or*, we can see something of Mallarmé's working process. What he will extract and keep from this affair when all reference to the events themselves has been discarded as so much dross, what will be left from his process of purification will be nothing but gold. Or perhaps it would be better to say *Or*. *Or* is the result of the poetic operation, it always is with Mallarmé. The poet-alchemist refines the base material of the world (ore) and discovers there 'son or' ('sonore', 'son *or*', '*son* or').

But if this is a meditation on *Or*, it is not in the form of an ode. What is being enacted here is a kind of catastrophe, an exposure of 'La très vaine divinité universelle': its *discrediting*. In the pages dedicated to this text in *La Religion de Mallarmé*, Marchal shows that what is being played out in this short text is nothing short of a theological disaster.[40] The financial disaster of a bank failing throws a light from the outside on the functioning of a system of credit, the heart of which has gone unquestioned until then: 'La très vaine divinité universelle sans extérieur ni pompes — ' [The very vain universal deity with neither exterior nor pomp –]; 'Ce refus à trahir quelque éclat doit peut-être cesser, dans le désespoir et si la lumière se fait de dehors: alors les somptuosités pareilles au vaisseau qui enfonce, ne se rend et fête ciel et eau de son incendie' [This refusal to betray any brightness must perhaps cease, in despair and if light shines from without: then, sumptuousness like a ship that founders, will not give up, and celebrate sky and sea as it burns].[41] The economy is theological in as much as it depends, in order to function, on the general credit accorded to money. This credit is a faith in the centre of the system which is without exterior ('sans extérieur') to the extent that it is the system's heart — it is absolute self-presence, and must be to be the source of value (the measure from which value is derived). We see clearly how this system functions when the response to a financial crisis is a flight to gold and its value increases — a reflex affirmation of faith. This response may be the response of the crowd, but 'l'unique œil lucide' [the unique, lucid eye] of the poet discerns something else.[42] When a bank is pulled down the centre of the system reveals itself for what it is, and faith is shaken. In the worst case, if faith could not be restored, then money would lose its value: 'Le numéraire [...] perd jusqu'à un sens' [Currency [...] loses any meaning]; and the result is hyper inflation: 'il inscrit plus de zéros: significant que son total équivaut spirituellement à rien, presque' [it inscribes more and more zeros: signifying that its total is spiritually equal to nothing, almost]. Whether this happens or not in actual fact, for the poet who penetrates the meaning of the catastrophe, is immaterial — it is almost inevitable that the crowd will rally round their divinity. The point is that the exposure has taken place. Order may be restored by a kind of general incomprehension of what has just happened, but the poet knows (he *sees* the sovereign exposure) and draws the consequences. In this general catastrophe,

the poet looks on as a curious bystander. Without returning to a position of naive faith, he can use his poetic gift to supplement the deficit of value 'avec des mots qu'il profère comme ceux de Vérité et de Beauté' [with the words he proffers, such as Truth and Beauty]. These words are of course used with a deep irony — the catastrophe has been the site of passage to the space that opens *after* beauty.

In Marchal's reading, the sunset of the fourth paragraph, already announced in the second as a 'vaisseau qui enfonce' [a ship that founders], is not simply, therefore, a metaphor for the financial collapse. If anything, the financial collapse is only a pretext drawn from a coordinate system to throw light on the general collapse of theological faith which Marchal tracks through Mallarmé's writings under the title 'la tragédie de la nature'. Marchal makes 'le drame solaire' the central motif of Mallarmé's poetics, and he always considers the sunset as emblematic of the end of the 'theological' era. So he writes:

> Cette représentation d'apocalypse d'un or au désespoir qui se révèle dans sa gloire céleste à l'heure même de son désastre ne peut se comprendre que si on la rapporte à l'archétype imaginaire de toutes les représentations mallarméennes de l'or: le soleil dieu de la mythologie. Si le poète voit dans l'affaire de Panama une tragédie de l'or, c'est parce qu'il veut y retrouver la figure de la seule tragédie authentique de l'or: la tragédie de la nature.[43]
>
> [This apocalyptic representation of gold, of the despair revealed in its celestial glory at the very moment of the disaster can only be understood if it is related to the imaginary archetype of all Mallarmean representations of gold: the sun god of mythology. If the poet sees a tragedy of 'or' in the Panama affair, this is because he is seeking to find there the figure of the only authentic tragedy of gold: the tragedy of nature]

For Derrida too, the sunset is the figure of the crisis. In 'Mallarmé', he writes: 'Tous les couchers de soleil mallarméens sont des instances de crise' [All Mallarmean sunsets are instances of crisis].[44] When we read this, we should be attentive to the particular interpretation of the 'crise' which Derrida elaborates throughout the text of 'La Double Séance'. Up to a certain point Marchal and Derrida are in agreement on the significance of the sunset and its relation to the 'crise', but where Marchal wants to uncover, through a kind of Heideggerian archaeology a more authentic 'or' which has been covered over through the theological history of the West, Derrida, we have seen, finds a displacement of signification from its onto-theological grounding in presence.[45]

In the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*, the sunset was the pure crime which negated the world and installed the 'décor de l'absence'; that is to say, the absence of any referent contingent to the work itself. Clearing the scene of any referent the *Sonnet* does not simply close down on a pure nothing. Even if this is the ideal, what is discovered here is that the signifier re-marks itself as a signifier in such a way that it can never be absolutely present to itself. This irreducible structure of the re-mark is what, for Derrida, undoes the metaphysics of presence.

The *Sonnet* is often referred to as the 'sonnet en –yx', but it could equally be the 'sonnet en — or'. This might even be more appropriate because it is the signifier 'or' which begins to multiply after the solar catastrophe. There are firstly the seven

'or's of the rhyme scheme. The first four are still concealed in their *or*e, but the fifth reveals itself for what it is, and it is when the rhyme scheme changes at the beginning of the tercets (and the 'or's become the masculine endings) that we find the only freestanding 'or' of the poem. There is the 'or' mixed into the 'S*oir*' and the 'n*oir*', as though in this darkness the 'or' is beginning to glimmer. Then there is the 'or' reflected in the 'c*ro*isée au n*or*d'. It comes backwards once more in the word 'c*ro*it' and then is righted again at the moment that the 'septu*or* se fixe'.

If the sunset is a moment of crisis, it is perhaps because a fragment of its light is carried into the absent space of the poem. This is suggested by the adjective which describes the pure crime ('lampadoph*or*e') where the 'or' of the sunset first passes into the night and is deposited in the heart of darkness ('n*oir*'). In Chapter 3 we said that the pure crime was not pure, that there is an irreducible residue of the outside inside. Chance is not eliminated because indefatigably the 'or' comes back. The 'or' becomes, therefore, in the first lines of 'Le Minuit' a rich and useless leftover — it is a trace of the pure crime:

> Certainement subsiste une présence de Minuit. L'heure n'a pas disparu par un miroir, ne s'est pas enfouie en tentures, évoquant un ameublement par sa vacante sonorité. Je me rappelle que **son or** allait feindre en l'absence un joyau nul de rêverie, riche et inutile survivance.[46]
>
> [Certainly there remains a presence of Midnight. The hour has not disappeared by a mirror, has not fled into wall-hangings, suggesting a furnishing by its vacant sonority. I recall that in the absence **its 'or'** was to feign a nothing jewel of reverie, rich and useless leftover]

The 'or' is a 'joyau nul', a vestige which is useless because it has no referent (is 'nul'), but also rich on account of that. Free from any referent it can wander (the verb 'ambler' seems to be buried in 'ameublement par'), suggesting another 'furnishing' in its vacant sonority. Does *Igitur* not here recall the 'inanité sonore' of the *Sonnet*? In each case, there is not quite nothing, there is the useless excess, the feeble light, recalled again in the last paragraph of 'Le Minuit': 'tandis que, lueur virtuelle, produite par sa propre apparition dans le miroitement de l'obscurité, scintilla le feu pur du diamant de l'horloge, seule survivance et joyau de la Nuit éternelle'.[47] The 'or' is a virtual glimmer in the reflection ('mi*ro*itement') where it is appropriately reflected or reversed before it is righted as the pure fire in the heart of the clock that marks midnight ('h*or*loge'). All that is left in the eternal Night, the 'or' becomes a kind of excess which cannot be incorporated by the Absolute: 'dénué de toute signification que de présence', the 'or' is still there, present in its absence of meaning.[48]

In 'Mallarmé', Derrida notes that between the first and last versions of *Or* the reference to the Panama affair is withdrawn. What is left, he says, might be considered a poetic meditation on the general meaning of gold. But if the text now has a referent it is not gold, but 'or': 'l'or est bien, à certains égards, le thème de ce texte, on dirait son 'signifié'. A y regarder de plus près, on s'aperçoit qu'il s'agit seulement d'écrire, de traiter le signifiant *or*' [gold is certainly, in many respects, the theme of this text, one might say its 'signified'. Looking closer, we realise that it is only a matter of writing, of dealing with the signifier *or*].[49] We have begun to

catch sight of the way in which this text not only deals with the signifier 'or', but also says something about the crisis of meaning through which this signifier is set loose across Mallarmé's text. If we agree with Marchal that 'le drame solaire' is, in Mallarmé's text, a catastrophe which closes down a theological era, then how can we understand the sunset of *Or* in terms of the reading of Mallarmé's texts which we have been following through *La Dissémination*?

For Derrida, the decision of Platonism is a theological decision. Meaning as presence is guaranteed in the last instance by the self-present origin of value, God. In Mallarmé's text this translates in economics into the universal divinity of gold. Gold is as much a theological concept as God, both represent an unquestioned self-identity ('sans extérieur') to which credit is extended. In the famous passage from Hegel's *Philosophy of History* the accomplishment of the Absolute at the end of history is considered in terms of a sunset, and this is no accident.[50] The presence to self of self-consciousness in the Absolute implies an interiorization of the sun as man achieves the apotheosis of his spiritual journey. In Mallarmé's text we have seen that this passage to the Absolute is achieved through a sunset as the pure work implies the absolute self-presence of meaning through the abolition of anything contingent. The sunset is, then, the end of the Livre. In the space of the Platonic decision, meaning is assured, but with the sunset this theological epoch reaches its culmination, and it is here that the crisis erupts. 'Des lors s'ouvre la crise, dans les lieux analogues de l'économie politique et du langage ou de l'écriture littéraire' [Now the crisis begins in the analogical areas of political economy and language or literary writing].[51] Instead of offering the reassuring self-proximity of meaning, the sunset displaces absolutely this ground. In *Or*, this loss of faith in the origin of value is considered in terms of a loss of meaning, 'Le numéraire [...] perd jusqu'à un sens', and a massive inflation of the signifier, 'il inscrit plus de zé*ros*', particularly, here, the signifier 'or'. *Or* describes and enacts this crisis as a kind of an-archy of the signifier, and Derrida's readings of *Or* demonstrate how this anarchy is not contained within the boundaries of this text, but distributes its affects across all of Mallarmé's writings, especially when in proximity to the sunsets: 'L'or, couleur des couchers de soleil' [Gold — colour of sunsets].[52]

3.2. Un coup de dés

> Pas plus qu'*Igitur*, *Un coup de dés* n'aura donc été un livre. (Jacques Derrida)[53]
>
> [No more than *Igitur*, *Un coup de dés* will not therefore have been a book][54]
>
> SI C'ÉTAIT LE NOMBRE / SI SEPT EST LE NOMBRE / SIX ÉTAIT LE NOMBRE
>
> (Ça s'écrit comme ça se prononce) (Jacques Derrida)[55]
>
> And he had in his right hand seven stars [...]

Through the course of this work I have continually referred to the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même* as an irreducible reference if we are to understand the 'crisis' years of Mallarmé's youth and to understand how this 'crisis' opens his text to the radical readings undertaken by Blanchot and Derrida. If attention is focused on the later

version of the *Sonnet* then it is difficult to get a measure of its importance for the 'metaphysical' reflections of *Igitur* and then for the crisis as it is enacted in *Un coup de dés*.[56] Criticism has not sufficiently taken account of this earlier version. As Pearson points out in *Unfolding Mallarmé*: 'almost always [...] attention has focussed on the 1887 version ('Ses purs ongles...'), while 'Sonnet allégorique de lui-même' (1868) has tended to be passed over as the less accomplished version of a hermetic masterpiece'.[57] This bias of attention has even led one eminent critic to completely efface the earlier version as he retraced the chronology of Mallarmé's crisis years.[58] The last section of this study will take the form of a restricted reading of *Un coup de dés* which will draw on the readings of the *Sonnet* and *Igitur* given above, developing those insights through consideration of the changes in the later version of the *Sonnet*. Restricted, firstly because an exhaustive reading of this poem is structurally impossible (for essential reasons encountered in Part 2 of this chapter), and secondly because my interest here is in showing how *Un coup de dés* describes a catastrophe rooted in the crisis of the late 1860s.[59]

There is something strange about the portrait of the Maître in *Un coup de dés*. There are a few elements of his description that are striking but difficult to account for unless the image is superimposed onto a portrait from another text.

The Maître appears on the fourth double-page spread of *Un coup de dés*. The third double-page spread had graphically shown a descent into the abyss, and when the Maître arrives on the scene it is as though he has risen dramatically from the depths. Mallarmé's word is 'surgi', from the verb 'surgir': to appear suddenly, to spring up, to arise. Editing just a little for the sake of clarity, we read in the upper half of the page: 'LE MAÎTRE | surgi | inférant | de cette conflagration | à ses pieds | que se prépare | au poing qui l'étreindrait | l'unique Nombre qui ne peut pas être un autre' [THE MASTER | arisen | inferring from this conflagration | at his feet | that is readied | in the fist that would clasp it | the unique Number which cannot be another]. I would like to focus here on the way in which the Maître infers from the fire at his feet that something is in preparation in his fist. Below we will return in detail to what is happening in his hand, but for the moment it is enough to draw attention to the conflagration.

The second descriptive element I want to look at occurs in the bottom half of the page — again, I will quote a slightly edited passage. Having inferred from the 'conflagration' that something is underway, the Master: 'hésite | plutôt | que de jouer | en maniaque chenu' [hesitates | rather | than play | as a hoary maniac]. The Maître waits. He will not play like a 'maniaque chenu'. But why evoke a hoary (white-haired) maniac here? Why do his feet burn? If we look at this portrait in proximity to a second text then these mysteries dissipate. This is a section of the description of Christ in John's Apocalypse:

> [14] His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; [15] And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. [16] And he had in his right hand seven stars.

A clear source, then, for Mallarmé's image of a resurgent Master. But what is going on in his fist? Mallarmé's poem is contrived such that the dice that the Maître holds

in his hand are equated with the Number, and this Number is not only the result of the dice throw, but it is also the number of stars in a constellation ('issu stellaire' [born of the stars], 'le Septentrion'). So the Maître perhaps holds seven stars in his hand. Perhaps, because nothing is certain here, and Mallarmé in fact suspends the 'result' so that in the end there is no end, but an infinite deferral. This is a bizarre kind of apocalypse. In what follows, I will link *Un coup de dés* to some of the other texts we have encountered in this study, so as to work towards an exegis of the dice-throw — the key to Mallarmé's poetics.

(SI SEPT EST LE NOMBRE)

On the last page of *Un coup de dés*, the result of the dice throw is linked to the constellation. The dice are now marking out a constellation which is enumerating 'sur quelque surface vacante et supérieure' [on some vacant and superior surface] a 'compte total en formation' [a total account in the making]. The 'compte totale en formation' is the poem that we are now reading and the dice are in motion as long as the 'compte' is in formation. So, just before the end, the movement of the dice (also the movement of the 'compte' as 'constellation') is described and enacted by the series of descending adjectives:

veillant
doutant
roulant
brillant et méditant

[keeping vigil | doubting | rolling | shining and meditating]

and then the last words before the coda:

avant de s'arrêter
à quelque point dernier qui le sacre

[before coming to a halt | at some end point that consecrates it]

The pronoun 'le' in the last quoted line refers to the masculine noun preceding the adjectives, that is to say, 'le compte'. So, it is when the poem arrives at the last point that it is, perhaps, consecrated. The 'constellation' is 'le coup de dés' which is enumerating itself through its own movement until the final point which is both the last point fixing the result of the dice throw and the last star of the 'constellation'.

Reference to *Igitur* will help us to untangle these associations. It is frequently noted that *Un coup de dés* bears a marked similarity to the earlier 'tale', especially to section IV as it is assembled in the *Œuvres completes*: 'Le Coup de dés'. 'Le coup de dés' is the action which the protagonist of the tale must complete in order that he 'accomplit une prédiction' and abolish chance ('J'étais'/'Jetter l'heure') — it is the act. At the end of Chapter 3 we looked briefly at this action and saw how it related to the *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*. It is through the act that the infinite is fixed or the Absolute is achieved in its purity. In *Igitur* we read 'l'infini est enfin *fixé*', and this recalls the last line of the *Sonnet* where 'le septuor se fixe'. We catch sight, then, of three points (in the *Sonnet*, in *Igitur*, and finally in *Un coup de dés*), which seem to be analogical: 1. the stellar apotheosis of the *Sonnet*; 2. the result of the 'coup de

dés' in *Igitur* which fixes the infinite; 3. the 'point dernier qui le sacre' of *Un coup de dés*. As though to emphasize the link between all three texts, it is just after the 'roc' or 'faux manoir' has dissipated and the block to the infinite is lifted (*Un coup de dés*) that we read '*C'ÉTAIT* [SEPT EST] *LE NOMBRE issu stellaire*'. If seven is the number then this is the stellar apotheosis which we saw fixes the infinite. This begins to explain why, in *Un coup de dés*, the final point is both the last point of the constellation and the point on the dice. *Un coup de dés* is contrived in such a way that it creates an amalgamation of the earlier works. In order to achieve this amalgamation, the number that would abolish chance changes from twelve in *Igitur* (associating it with the twelve of midnight when the dice must be thrown) to the number of the 'constellation' (or the 'Septentrion') in *Un coup de dés*.

It should straight away be noted that, although these points are analogous, between the stellar apotheosis of the *Sonnet* and that of *Un coup de dés*, there is an important difference. In the *Sonnet* there is a kind of certainty to the gesture which consecrates the reflexive turn of the poem. In *Un coup de dés*, however, this certainty has disappeared. The work may have banished all reference to anything contingent to the work itself, but a doubt has emerged as to the effectiveness of the Act to abolish chance.[60] '[...] sinon que sur la glace encor | De scintillation le septuor se fixe' says the *Sonnet*; 'EXCEPTÉ PEUT-ÊTRE UNE CONSTELLATION' [EXCEPT PERHAPS A CONSTELLATION] says *Un coup de dés*. The triumph of the *Sonnet* gives way to a more nuanced understanding of the act ('PERHAPS'), the failure of which is announced in capital letters through the central phrase of *Un coup de dés*.

This failure to abolish chance, the irreducible ambiguity of what is being attempted here, was already the subject of *Igitur*. On the one hand the act is accomplished and chance is abolished ('l'infini est enfin *fixé*'), but on the other, the fact that chance was already at work in the very act itself means that it is a kind of madness to think that it has been abolished through that act.[61] It is a kind of necessary or useful madness ('cette folie était nécessaire') because it offers the only chance for the infinite, it is '*ce qui permet à l'infini d'être*'. But it only heightens the ambiguity of the result: 'On comprend ce que signifie son ambiguïté [...] *il y a et il n'y a pas de hasard*' [We understand the meaning of its ambiguity [...] *there is and there is not chance*].[62] 'La fin du livre e(s)t le commencement de l'écriture', as we said above.

If we look at the differences between the two versions of the *Sonnet*, we can see very clearly the way in which this poem is altered by the growing concern that the achievement of the *Sonnet* may not be quite what it had seemed.

(SIX ÉTAIT LE NOMBRE)

There are two related variations that I would like to consider between the version of the *Sonnet* sent to Cazalis in 1868 and the version published in *Poésies* in 1887. The first has to do with the change in the rhyme scheme, and the second with the introduction of 'L'Angoisse' into the later version.

The Rhyme Scheme

In the quatrains, Mallarmé maintains the same rhyming words across the two versions. It is in the tercets that a striking change takes place. The first masculine ending in the tercets remains the same, and 'or' ('lueur virtuelle', 'seule survivance', etc.) again makes its only appearance distilled from the dross. It is in the next line that the variation begins. 'Rixe' is now dropped and 'décor' is lifted from the second tercet to provide a consecutive rhyme and an alteration to the earlier rhyme scheme. The other rhyming words are the same, even while their positions are changed, except for the word 'septuor' which is now positioned as the last word of the *Sonnet* where in 1868 it was embedded in the last line. To summarize: the rhyme scheme changes from ABB AAB in 1868 to AAB ABA in 1887, and this clearly results in one more rhyme ending A and one less rhyme ending B. To achieve this, 'rixe' is dropped and 'septuor' promoted.

This reshuffling of the line endings does not create a perfected version of a hermetic masterpiece, but it is calculated to destroy the 'perfection' of the earlier work. In 1867 the positioning of the final 'x' in the last line was a crucial gesture as it provided the last star in the constellation ('septuor'), and in an act which we saw was both constitutive and performative, consecrated the *Sonnet* as a self-reflexive work, a 'sonnet nul' whose only reference was itself.[63] The effect of the change in the 1887 version is to defer this ending or 'point dernier' by leaving the *Sonnet* anticipating its closure. The last line now reads: 'De scintillations sitôt le septuor'. The 'septuor' is not fixed, the best we can say is that its closure is announced.

There are now no longer seven stars in this constellation, but six. This same deferral of closure is enacted in *Un coup de dés*. At the end of the poem, the dice are rolling and the possibility of a final point which will consecrate the work is announced, but only very ambiguously. Here are the last words:

veillant
doutant
roulant
brillant et méditant
avant de s'arrêter
à quelque point dernier qui le sacre

Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés

[keeping vigil | doubting | rolling | shining and meditating |
before coming to a halt | at some end point that consecrates it |
All thought emits a Throw of the Dice]

The last line refers back to the beginning of the poem, making a kind of circle so that the movement of the work is infinite, the end is the beginning and the beginning is already the end. It never really begins and it never really ends. We might take the second to last line to mean that the dice have settled and the last point in the constellation has been placed, 'PEUT-ÊTRE UNE CONSTELLATION' the poem says. Maybe, but this would be a kind of fiction and it would fail to integrate the very last line into the work, it would also contradict the central thread,

'UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS N'ABOLIRA LE HASARD'. If the number is seven, '*SI* | *SEPT EST* | *LE NOMBRE*', '*CE SERAIT* | *LE HASARD*' [*IF* | *SEVEN IS* | *THE NUMBER* | *IT WOULD BE* | *CHANCE*]. So chance has not been abolished, whatever the result of the dice-throw. Before stopping on some final point which will consecrate the work, 'Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés' [All Thought emits a Throw of the Dice]. There is an infinite deferral of the end, and any apotheosis which would close down the work by eliminating chance is revealed to be a denial of what is happening — an unjustifiable faith in an ultimate meaning.

Like *Or*, *Un coup de dés* begins with a shipwreck, which might also be a sunset ('surgi | inférant | de cette conflagration | à ses pieds | de l'horizon unanime' [arisen | inferring | from this conflagration at his feet | from the unanimous horizon]), and in the heart of this crisis the Maître must accomplish the act which would abolish chance.[64] The act creates the space of absence ('le décor de l'absence' in the *Sonnet*, and 'ces parages | du vague | en quoi toute réalité se dissout' [in these latitudes | of the indeterminate (wave) | in which all reality dissolves] in *Un coup de dés*). And on the same page, as well as 'pouring', the neologism 'verser' with the meaning 'to put into verse' is suggested: 'une élévation ordinaire verse l'absence' [an ordinary elevation pours/verses absence]; but the 'or' ('*or*dinaire') overflows the absence created through the act of the Maître. Here again, the result is irreducibly ambiguous. This brings us to the second of the variations in the *Sonnet*.

'L'Angoisse' (Hamlet)

In the 1887 version of the *Sonnet*, the disruption of the triumphant apotheosis of the poem is accompanied by the arrival of 'L'Angoisse' in the second line of the first quatrain. The coming of 'L'Angoisse' is emphasized by the capital letter and it indicates a doubt that was not apparent in the 1868 version. It is in this situation where the infinite is not fixed by the apparition of the seventh star and closure is indefinitely deferred through the alteration of the rhyme scheme that this painful emotion becomes a central character in the scene.

In Mallarmé's 1886 piece for *La Revue Indépendante*, *Hamlet*, he describes *Hamlet* as evoking a fascination which is the 'parente de l'angoisse'. Given the proximity in date to the second version of the *Sonnet*, we might get a better understanding of 'l'angoisse' if we refer to this review. The essay begins with the poet being called back from contemplating the 'feuille-morte' of nature in autumn to the city where the theatre season is getting under way. Autumn, as Marchal shows at length in *La Religion de Mallarmé*, is analogous in Mallarmé's writings to the sunset, the golden colours of the leaves evoking the rays of the dying sun.[65] So *Hamlet* begins, like *Or*, like the *Sonnet* and like *Un coup de dés* with the solar catastrophe. *Hamlet* is a felicitous debut because the tragedy of this individual is the archetype of a more obscure tragedy which 'l'unique oeil lucide' of the poet is contemplating 'Loin de tout' in Nature: 'Hamlet extériorise, sur des planches, ce personnage unique d'une tragédie intime et occulte, son nom même affiché exerce sur moi, sur toi qui le lis, une fascination, parente de l'angoisse' [Hamlet externalizes, on the stage, the lone character of an intimate, occult tragedy; if his name alone is posted, it exerts on me, or on you if you read it, a fascination, akin to anxiety].[66] Mallarmé goes on

to articulate the chance occurrence that has him saying 'adieu' to the 'splendeurs d'un holocauste d'année élargi à tous les temps' [splendours of a holocaust of the old year, enlarged to befit all times], with its colours of 'pourpre, violet, rose et *toujours or*' [purple, violet, pink, and *always gold*], to consider the play which he believes to be 'la pièce [...] celle par excellence' [the play par excellence]. He then gives a clue as to why he considers this 'solitaire drame' ('drame solaire'?), to be *the* play, and the reason for the anxiety that it evokes. The figure of Hamlet is caught in a kind of perpetual suspense; '*le seigneur latent qui ne peut devenir*' [*the latent lord who cannot become*], he walks in a confused labyrinth, his perambulations prolonged by the 'suspens d'un acte inachevé' [the suspension of an unaccomplished act]. For this reason, *Hamlet* is, for Mallarmé, the archetype of all plays, it is 'le spectacle même pourquoi existent la rampe' [the very spectacle for which the stage exists]. Like the mime, Hamlet is suspended between desire and its accomplishment, and while this is an eternal tragedy, it is particularly relevant to the time when Mallarmé is writing, the 'fin de siècle', the time of the crisis (*Crise de vers*):[67] 'Mime, penseur, le tragédien interprète Hamlet en souverain plastique et mental de l'art et surtout comme Hamlet existe par l'hérédité en les esprits de la fin de ce siècle' [A mime and a thinker, the tragedian interprets Hamlet as a mental and material sovereign of art, and especially as Hamlet's heredity hangs over this fin-de-siècle].[68] In the 1887 version of the *Sonnet* 'L'Angoisse' takes the place of the 'pure Crime'. In this network of associations, we can now see that, like the anguish of Hamlet, 'L'Angoisse' of the *Sonnet* is that of an act which is perpetually deferred. Like the mime, like Hamlet, the Maître is trapped in the suspense of an act between desire and its accomplishment. This is why we catch sight of the shadow of Hamlet in *Un coup de dés*. The 'drame solaire' is the catastrophe of an infinite deferral of meaning as the presence of the present is displaced from itself. It opens the space of a perpetual allusion that can never close down on a self-present truth, that can never quite install the 'point dernier qui le sacre' because it is always undone by chance, which cannot be abolished.

This displacement of presence, staged unambiguously in *Un coup de dés* as an apocalypse, seems to summon two responses. It is a crisis that can be viewed in two ways. Firstly, we are enthralled to what is lost: the promise of a return to self in presence, *parousia*. In this understanding, *Un coup de dés* would be the elaboration of a false infinite as a series that is perpetually open. We have seen how this response is strongly encouraged by the logic of the dice-throw. However, Derrida's readings of Mallarmé take us in a decidedly different direction. The mime implied the movement of a writing that, neither presentation nor representation, exceeded the order of presence — it opened a new space where the origin is an originary composition of anticipation and memory ('la zone d'originarité'). Implied here is another temporality. To read *Un coup de dés* simply according to the first response is not to acknowledge this movement, it is to confuse the issue and see the displacement of presence in terms of a temporality bound to presence. For Derrida, this would be to miss the radical implications of Mallarmé's writing. It is the passage to this other temporality that I have sought to establish in this study by way of the sunset, and it is this passage, above all, that is enacted in *Un coup de dés*.

Notes to Chapter 5

1. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 2000), p. 3, hereafter referred to as *D**.
2. Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination*, p. 9.
3. *L'Entretien infini* was published in 1969. In 1967, Derrida published three books: a collection of essays entitled *L'Écriture et la différence*, *De la grammatologie*, and a long essay on Husserl entitled *La Voix et le phénomène*.
4. Blanchot, 'Note', in *L'Entretien infini*, p. vii.
5. Derrida, 'Pour l'amour de Lacan', in *Résistances de la psychoanalyse* (Paris: Éditions de Galilée, 1994), p. 80.
6. Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967), p. 38: 'La différance tout court serait plus "originaire", mais on ne pourrait plus l'appeler "origine" ni "fondement", ces notions appartenant essentiellement à l'histoire de l'onto-théologie, c'est-à-dire au système fonctionnant comme effacement de la différence' [Differance would quite simply be more 'originary', but one cannot call it and 'origin' or a 'foundation', these notions belonging essentially to the history of onto-theology, that is to say, to the system functioning as the erasure of difference].
7. This is clearly not to say that Blanchot is simply copying Derrida. In the previous chapter we saw at length how Blanchot's work — as it articulates an 'outside' that absolutely resists dialectical recuperation — already constitutes a radical questioning of the value of presence. The point is rather to suggest that Blanchot's work is here inflected by Derrida's arrival on the scene.
8. Evidently, the context in which they are working is infinitely more complex than this. I simply want to indicate here that questions about the 'end of history' in France at this time have their own history, and that Kojève's reading of Hegel in the 1930s was a highly significant moment in this history. On Kojève's reading of Hegel and the significance of the 'Livre', see Jean-Michel Rey, 'Kojève ou la fin de l'histoire', *Critique*, 264 (1969), 437–59.
9. In an interview in *Positions*, Derrida states explicitly the chronological and theoretical priority of this text. Speaking of *La Voix et le phénomène* he says: 'C'est peut-être l'essai auquel je tiens le plus. Sans doute aurais-je pu le relier comme une longue note à l'un ou l'autre des deux autres ouvrages [*De la grammatologie* and *L'Écriture et la différence*]. *De la grammatologie* s'y réfère et en économise le développement. Mais dans une architecture philosophique classique. *La voix* viendrait en premier lieu: s'y pose en un point qui, pour des raisons que je ne peux expliquer ici, parait juridiquement décisif, la question du privilège de la voix et de l'écriture phonétique dans ses rapports à toute l'histoire de l'Occident, telle qu'elle se laisse représenter dans l'histoire de la métaphysique, et dans sa forme la plus moderne, la plus critique, la plus vigilante: la phénoménologie transcendantale de Husserl' [It is perhaps the essay which is most important for me. I could certainly add it as a long note to one of the other two publications. *Of Grammatology* refers to it and economizes its development. But in a classical philosophical architecture. *Speech and Phenomena* would come in the first position: in a precise place which, for reasons I cannot go into here, seemed to be juridically decisive, it posed the question of the privilege accorded to the voice and phonetic writing in its relation with the entire history of the West — such as it allows itself to be represented in the history of metaphysics, and in its most modern, critical, and vigilant form: Husserl's transcendental phenomenology] (p. 13).
10. Recourse to this essay will enable us to situate Mallarmé in Derrida's discourse and the references will for this reason take the form of a commentary. For a critical evaluation of *La Voix et le phénomène* see Françoise Dastur's 'Derrida and the Question of Presence', *Research in Phenomenology*, 36 (2006), 45–62.
11. Derrida, *La Voix et le phénomène* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1967), p. 3, hereafter referred to as *VP*.
12. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. by David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 5, hereafter referred to as *SP*.
13. 'Ce privilège définit l'élément même de la pensée philosophique, il est l'*évidence* même, la pensée consciente elle-même, il commande tout concept possible de la vérité et du sens. On ne peut le suspecter sans commencer à énucléer la conscience elle-même depuis un ailleurs de la

philosophie qui ôte toute *sécurité* et tout *fondement* possible au discours. Et c'est bien autour du privilège du présent actuel, du maintenant, que se joue, en dernière instance, ce débat, qui ne peut ressembler à aucun autre, entre la philosophie, qui est toujours philosophie de la présence, et une pensée de la non-présence' (*VP*, p. 70) [it defines the very element of philosophical thought, it is *evidence* itself, conscious thought itself, it governs every possible concept of truth and sense. No sooner do we question this privilege than we begin to get at the core of consciousness itself from a region that lies elsewhere than philosophy, a procedure that would remove every possible *security* and *ground* from discourse. In the last analysis, what is at stake is indeed the privilege of the actual present, the now. This conflict, necessarily unlike any other, is between philosophy, which is always a philosophy of presence, and a meditation on nonpresence (*SP*, p. 63)].

14. 'Unique fois au monde, parce qu'en raison d'un événement toujours que j'expliquerai, il n'est pas de Présent, non — un présent n'existe pas [...] Faute que se déclare la Foule, faute — de tout. Mal informé celui qui se crierait son propre contemporaine, désertant, usurpant, avec impudence égale, quand du passé cessa et que tarde un futur ou que les deux se remmêlent perplexement en vue de masquer l'écart' [Unique time on the earth, because, due to an event that still I will explain, there is no Present, no — a present does not exist [...] For lack of the Crowd's declaring itself, for lack of — everything. Uninformed is he who would proclaim himself his own contemporary, deserting or usurping with equal imprudence, when the past seems to cease and the future to stall, or the two mix with each other confusedly with a view to masking the gap] (Mallarmé, *L'Action restreinte*, in *OC*, p. 372). NB. I have made a number of alterations to Johnson's translation (in Mallarmé, *Divagations*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), p. 218). Most significantly, I have reintroduced 'ou que les deux se remmêlent perplexement' which she had dropped. The co-implication of the past and the future in the present is precisely what undoes the punctual now in Husserl's work, opening it to the Mallarmean reading put forward by Derrida. The 'event' is what we are here trying to think by way of the sunset.

15. Cf. Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (hereafter referred to as *DG*): 'L'idée du livre, c'est l'idée d'une totalité, finie ou infinie, du signifiant; cette totalité du signifiant ne peut être ce qu'elle est, une totalité, que si une totalité constituée du signifié lui préexiste, surveille son inscription et ses signes, en est indépendante dans son idéalité. L'idée du livre, qui renvoi toujours à une totalité naturelle, est profondément étrangère au sens de l'écriture. Elle est la protection encyclopédique de la théologie du logocentrisme contre la disruption de l'écriture, contre son énergie aphoristique et [...] contre la différence en général' (*DG*, p. 30) [The idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless a totality constituted by the signified preexists it, supervises its inscriptions and its signs, and is independent of it in its ideality. The idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy, and [...] against difference in general (*OG*, p. 18)]. Translations of this work are taken from Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), hereafter referred to as *OG*.

16. This is reiterated in *De la grammatologie* where Derrida writes: 'L'horizon du savoir absolu, c'est l'effacement de l'écriture dans le logos, la résomption de la trace dans la parousie, la réappropriation de la différance, l'accomplissement de ce que nous avons appelé ailleurs la *métaphysique du propre*' (*DG*, p. 41) [The horizon of absolute knowledge is the erasure of writing in the logos, the resumption of the trace in parousia, the reappropriation of difference, the completion of what we have elsewhere called the *metaphysics of the proper* (*OG*, p. 26)].

17. Cf. Rey, 'Kojève ou la fin de l'histoire': 'Le Livre est désormais l'espace d'une Raison tout entière présente à soi dans la pensée de son origine et de sa fin (l'origine n'étant que *l'anticipation* de la fin). Cette nécessité s'inscrit indéfiniment dans le Livre, elle donne un sens au Livre et oriente toute lecture, c'est-à-dire toute re-lecture. La circularité n'a lieu que dans le Livre comme mouvement d'une Totalité qui devient présente à soi (comme totalité expressive) en décrivant la direction de son propre procès. Et l'histoire elle-même n'est que l'histoire du Livre qui a pour (autre) nom le Temps. C'est parce que le Livre ne s'écrit qu'à la fin de l'Histoire qu'il recèle en lui-même toutes les possibilités du Discours, qu'il est le dernier (et définitif) refuge

de l'Esprit: il "est" donc l'Eternité et non plus seulement le Temps' [The Book is from now the space of a Reason entirely present to itself in the thought of its origin and its end (the origin being only the *anticipation* of this end). This necessity inscribes itself endlessly in the Book, it gives a meaning to the Book and orientates any reading, that is, any re-reading. Circularity only takes place in the Book as the movement of a Totality becoming present to itself (as expressive totality) while describing the direction of its process. And history itself is nothing but the history of the Book which is also called Time. It is because the Book is only written at the end of History that it contains all discursive possibilities, that it is the final (and definitive) refuge of spirit: it 'is' therefore Eternity and no longer simply Time].

18. *Lecture de Mallarmé*, p. 186.
19. 'Mallarmé's "Sonnet en yx": The Ambiguities of Speculation'.
20. Deirdre Reynolds, 'Mallarmé et la transformation esthétique du langage, à l'exemple de "Ses purs ongles"', *French Forum* 5 (1990), 203–20.
21. 'Ce conte s'adresse à l'Intelligence du lecteur qui met les choses en scène elle-même' (*Igitur*, in *OC*, p. 433).
22. *Igitur*, in *OC*, p. 435.
23. 'L'Action restreinte', in *OC*, p. 372.
24. The interpolation of this silent *s*, 'lettre "disséminante" par excellence, disait Mallarmé' (Derrida, *Positions*, p. 133) is intended to complicate this articulation. Creating a hymen (difference *and* identity), the *s* situates Mallarmé in the undecidable space of a *brisure*: 'Vous avez, je suppose, rêvé de trouver un seul mot pour désigner la différence et l'articulation. Au hasard du "*Robert*", je l'ai peut-être trouvé, à la condition de jouer sur le mot, ou plutôt d'en indiquer le double sens. Ce mot est *brisure:* " — Partie brisée, cassée. Cf. brèche, cassure, fracture, faille, fente, fragment, — Articulation par charnière de deux parties d'un ouvrage de menuiserie, de serrurerie. La brisure d'un volet. Cf. joint."' [You have, I suppose, dreamt of finding a single word for designating difference and articulation. I have perhaps located it by chance in Robert if I play on the word, or rather indicate its double meaning. This word is *brisure* [joint/break]: 'broken, cracked part. Cf. breach, crack fracture, fault, split, fragment — Hinged articulation of two parts of wood- or metal-work. The hinge, the *brisure* of a shutter. Cf. joint.] Roger Laporte (letter to Jacques Derrida, extract reproduced in *De la grammatologie*, p. 96).
25. 'En guise de dissémination, se dit ainsi la différance en laquelle la présence se déconstruit [...] Tout est autrement si on peut encore parler d'être' [By way of dissemination is said the differance in which presence deconstructs itself [...] Everything is other if we can still speak of being], E. Levinas, 'Tout autrement', in 'Jacques Derrida', special number, *L'Arc*, 54 (1973), 37.
26. Without going into the detail of this history, which can be read from pp. 245–49 of 'La Double Séance', I will reproduce here Derrida's conclusions: 'Avec tous ses doubles fonds, ses abîmes, son trompe-l'œil, une telle organisation d'écritures ne pouvait être un référent simple et prétextuel pour *Mimique* de Mallarmé. Mais malgré la complexité (structurelle, temporelle, topologique, textuelle) de cet objet-livret, on aurait pu être tenté de le considérer comme un système clos sur lui-même, replié sur le rapport, certes très enchevêtré, entre, disons, l'"acte" du mimodrame (celui dont Mallarmé dit qu'il s'écrit sur une page blanche) et l'après-coup du livret. Dans ce cas, le renvoi textuel de Mallarmé trouverait là un cran d'arrêt définitif. 'Or il n'en est rien. Telle écriture qui ne renvoie qu'à elle-même nous report *à la fois*, indéfiniment et systématiquement, à une autre écriture'. [With all its false bottoms, it abysses, its *tromp-l'œil*, such an arrangement of writings could not be a simple pretextual referent for Mallarmé's *Mimique*. But despite the (structural, temporal, textual) complexity of this booklet-object, one might have been tempted to consider it a system closed upon itself, folded back over the relation, which is certainly very tangled, between, let us say, the 'act' of the mimodrama [*l'après-coup*] of the booklet. In this case, Mallarmé's textual play of reference would have been checked by a definite safety catch. But such is not the case. A writing that refers back only to itself carries us *at the same time*, indefinitely and systematically, to some other writing]. Nothing can serve as a simple, self-identical referent for *Mimique* which is not itself already caught up in the play of the general text (*dissémination*).
27. *Mimique*, in *OC*, p. 310.
28. In his article, 'Mallarmé on Derrida' (*The French Review*, 61.6 (1988), 884–89), R. G. Cohn takes issue with Derrida's reading, arguing that the evidence of Mallarmé's text does not support

the hypothesis that he would ever have considered the 'hymen' in terms of a membrane which separates, but that it *always* has the sense of a consummation or marriage: 'But in none of the examples he adduces does the word convincingly suggest the latter, somewhat technical (for Mallarmé) meaning, certainly not in the sense of ''barrier'' on which Derrida insists. Furthermore, in some cases which he emphasises, this second meaning makes for truly clumsy and even grotesque imagery'. Even if this is maintained, and we cannot ultimately justify this double meaning of the signifier 'hymen' (I am not convinced by Cohn's arguments on this score), then Derrida's reading is not substantially undermined on its own terms. The meaning of the word hymen is not as important as its functioning in the text, where it serves to hold open the milieu of the 'fiction'. Derrida even anticipates Cohn's criticism in the text of 'La Double Séance', where he writes: 'le caractère de signifiant irremplaçable, que tout semblait lui concéder, était placé là comme un piège. Ce mot, cette syllepse, n'est pas indispensable, la philologie et l'étymologie ne nous intéressent que secondairement et la perte de l'"hymen" ne serait pas irréparable pour *Mimique*. L'effet en est d'abord produit par la syntaxe qui dispose l'"entre" de telle sorte que le suspens ne tienne plus qu'à la place et non au contenu des mots. Par l'"hymen" on remarque seulement ce que la place du mot *entre* marque déjà et marquerait même si le mot "hymen" n'apparaissait pas. Si l'on remplaçait "hymen" par "mariage" ou "crime", "identité" ou "différence", etc., l'effet serait le même, à une condensation ou accumulation économique près, que nous n'avons pas négligée. Le mot "entre", qu'il s'agisse de confusion ou d'intervalle *entre*, porte donc toute la force de l'opération. Il faut déterminer l'hymen à partir de l'entre et non l'inverse' (*D*, p. 272) [the irreplaceable character of this signifier, which everything seems to grant it, was laid out like a trap. This word, this syllepsis, is not indispensible; philology and etymology interest us only secondarily, and the loss of the word 'hymen' would not be irreparable for *Mimique*. It produces its effects first and foremost through the syntax, which disposes the '*entre*' in such a way that the suspense is due only to the placement and not the content of the words. Through the 'hymen' one can remark only what the place of the word *entre* already marks and would mark even if the word 'hymen' were not there. If we replaced 'hymen' by 'marriage' or 'crime', 'identity' or 'difference', etc., the effect would be the same, the only loss being a certain economic condensation or accumulation, which has not gone unnoticed. It is the 'between', whether it names fusion or separation, that thus carries all the force of the operation. The hymen must be determined through the *entre* and not the other way around (*D**, p. 220)].

29. Mallarmé, *Divagations*, trans. by Barbara Johnson, p. 140.
30. This is the 'zone d'originarité' we encountered above in Derrida's reading of Husserl.
31. The reference here is to Roland Barthes, and specifically his essay 'Ecrire, verbe intransitive?' (*Oeuvres complètes*, 3 vols (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993–1995), II, 972–80). This essay was first delivered as a paper at the 1966 conference at Johns Hopkins University, the same conference where Derrida gave his seminal paper 'La Structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines', later published in *L'Écriture et la différence*. In the first paragraph of Barthes's paper he makes reference to Mallarmé, using his name to indicate a rupture in literature; as is so often the case in post-war French criticism we read here the phrase 'depuis Mallarmé'. In the movement sketched in Barthes's essay from a transitive to an intransitive writing the referent becomes suspicious as a 'mythic alibi', and writing becomes a self interrogation of literature by literature: 'Le sens ou si l'on préfère le but, de cette recherche est de substituer à l'instance de la réalité (ou instance du référent), alibi mythique qui a dominé et domine encore l'idée de littérature, l'instance même du discours: le champ de l'écrivain n'est que l'écriture même, non comme "forme" pure, telle qu'a pu la concevoir une esthétique de l'art pour l'art, mais d'une façon beaucoup plus radicale comme seul espace possible de celui qui écrit' [The meaning or if you prefer the aim, of this research is to substitute for the authority of reality (authority of the referent), a mythic alibi which has dominated and still dominates the thought of literature, the authority of discourse itself: the writer's field is nothing but writing itself, not as a pure 'form', such as it has been conceived in an aesthetics of art for art, but in a much more radical sense as the only possible space for the one who writes].
32. 'Préface' to Mallarmé, *Un coup de dés*, in *OC*, p. 455.
33. Ibid., p. 455.

34. Derrida continues: 'Les conséquences *critiques*: celles qui doivent affecter la critique mallarméenne, puis la critique en général, liée comme son nom l'indique, à la possibilité du décidable [...] mais aussi les effets critiques qu'une certaine re-marque ou re-trempe de l'espacement produit sur l'opération littéraire, sur la 'littérature' qui dès lors entre en crise' [One must deduce its *critical* consequences: those that would affect Mallarmean criticism, and eventually criticism in general, which is linked, as its name indicates, to the possibility of decidability [...] but also the critical effects that a certain re-mark or re-tempering of spacing produces upon literary operations, upon 'literature', which thereby goes into crisis].
35. 'L'*espacement* (on remarquera que ce mot dit l'articulation de l'espace et du temps, le devenir-espace du temps et le devenir-temps de l'espace) est toujours le non-perçu, le non-présent et le non-conscient. *Comme tels*, si on peut encore se servir de cette expression de manière non phénoménologique: car nous passons ici même la limite de la phénoménologie. L'archi-écriture comme espacement ne peut pas se donner *comme telle*, dans l'expérience phénoménologique d'une *présence*. Elle marque le *temps mort* dans la présence du présent vivant, dans la forme générale de toute présence. Le temps mort est à l'œuvre. C'est pourquoi, une fois encore, malgré toutes les ressources discursives qu'elle doit lui emprunter, la pensée de la trace ne se confondra jamais avec une phénoménologie de l'écriture. Comme une phénoménologie du signe en général, une phénoménologie de l'écriture est impossible. Aucune intuition ne peut s'accomplir au lieu où "les "blancs" en effet assument l'importance" (*Préface* au *Coup de dés*)' (*DG*, p. 99) [*Spacing* (notice that this word speaks the articulation of space and time) is always unperceived, the non-present, and the non-conscious. *As such*, if one can still use that expression in a non-phenomenological way; for here we pass the very limits of phenomenology. Archi-writing as spacing cannot occur *as such* within the phenomenological experience of a *presence*. It marks *the dead time* within the presence of the living present, within the general form of all presence. The dead time is at work. That is why, once again, in spite of all the discursive resources that the former may borrow from the latter, the concept of the trace will never be merged with a phenomenology of writing. As the phenomenology of the sign in general, a phenomenology of writing is impossible. No intuition can be realised in the place where 'the 'whites' indeed take on an importance' (Preface to *Coup de dés*) (*OG*, p. 68)]. The non-phenomenon of 'espacement', its non-pertinence to the metaphysics of presence, means that it is a radical outside for philosophy, and to this extent it has the same disruptive effect as the 'dehors' as it was encountered in Blanchot's writing in the last chapter. On the subject of 'espacement' see also the debate with Jean-Louis Houdebine towards the end of the third interview in *Positions* (continued in the exchange of letters included at the end). On the issue of an understanding of 'espacement' as a radical alterity, Derrida's remarks in the letter are particularly interesting. Mallarmé's name comes back again: '*Espacement/altérité*: sur leur indissociabilité, il n'y a donc pas de désaccord entre nous. Dans l'analyse de l'espacement, comme je l'ai rappelé au cours de l'entretien, j'ai toujours souligné au moins deux traits: 1. que l'espacement était l'impossibilité pour une identité de se fermer sur elle-même, sur sa coïncidence avec soi. L'irréductibilité de l'espacement, c'est l'irréductibilité de l'autre. 2. que "espacement" ne désignait pas seulement l'intervalle mais un mouvement "productif" "génétique", "pratique", une "opération", si vous voulez, avec, aussi, son sens mallarméen' [*Spacing/alterity*: on their indisociability there is no disagreement between us. In the analysis of spacing, as I recalled during the interview, I have always underlined at least two features: 1. That spacing means the impossibility for an identity to close on itself, of its coincidence with itself. The irreducibility of spacing is the irreducibility of the other. 2. That 'spacing' not only names the interval but also a 'productive' 'genetic' 'practice', an 'operation' if you like, in its Mallarmean as sense as well] (*Positions*, p. 130).
36. *OC*, p. 360.
37. Derrida, 'Mallarmé', in *Tableau de la littérature française: de Madame de Staël à Rimbaud* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 370 : 'La rhétorique s'est-elle jamais intéressée à autre chose qu'au sens d'un texte, c'est-à-dire à son contenu. Les substitutions qu'elle définit sont toujours d'un sens plein à un sens plein; et même si l'un tient lieu de l'autre, c'est en tant que sens qu'il devient un thème pour la rhétorique, même si ce sens est en position de signifiant ou comme on dit aussi, de véhicule. Mais la rhétorique ne traite pas, en tant que telle, des formes signifiantes (phoniques, graphiques) ou des effets de syntaxe, du moins dans la mesure où le contrôle sémantique ne les

domine pas. Pour que la rhétorique ou la critique aient quelque chose à voir ou à faire devant un texte, il faut qu'un sens y soit *déterminable*' [Rhetoric has never been interested in anything but the meaning of a text, that is, its content. The substitutions that it defines are always from a full meaning to a full meaning; and even if one takes the place of the other, it is as meaning that it becomes a theme for rhetoric — even if this meaning is in the position of signifier or as we also say, of vehicle. But rhetoric does not as such deal with signifying forms (phonic, graphic) or effects of syntax, at least to the extent that they are not dominated by semantic control. In order for rhetoric or criticism to have something to see or do when faced with a text, there must be a *determinable* meaning].

38. We are making our way back to the sunset. It is worth recalling here Freud's comment in the Schreber case: 'The sun therefore is nothing but another sublimated symbol for the father'. This series of associations (sun/father/capital — and therefore head/centre) is exposed in its systematic unity in 'La Pharmacie de Platon', the essay immediately preceding the 'Sessions'. It is this system in its entirety that Derrida proposes is displaced in Mallarmé's text, and it is this displacement that I have proposed to analyse, in this study, by way of the sunset. From this list of coordinate concepts, it should be clear why I would insist that the displacement here articulated is above all a displacement of sovereignty.
39. *The National Observer*, 25 February 1893 (reproduced in *OC*, p. 1577).
40. *La Religion de Mallarmé*, pp. 437–44.
41. Mallarmé, *OC*, p. 398. *Or* is a short piece, little more than a page. All references can therefore be found on pp. 398–99 of *OC*.
42. Mallarmé, *Hamlet*, in *OC*, p. 299. Again it is a matter of penetrating the meaning of 'le drame solaire'.
43. *La Religion de Mallarmé*, p. 438.
44. 'Mallarmé', in *Tableau*, p. 376.
45. Marchal, *La Religion de Mallarmé*, p. 441: 'Toute la pratique poétique de Mallarmé tend ainsi à retrouver le sens de la valeur symbolique de l'or, en le libérant du modèle économique dont la domination a fait de l'espace social le lieu d'une théocratie absolue: le poète est celui qui retrouve, vis-à-vis de la "divinité universelle" de l'or la démarche démystificatrice de la philologie exhumant sous les figures des dieux anciens la dimension symbolique fondamentale de la tragédie solaire' [All of Mallarmé's poetic practice tends in this way to rediscover the meaning of the symbolic value of gold, liberating it from the economic model whose domination has made the social space into the site of an absolute theocracy: the poet is the one who rediscovers, faced with the 'universal divinity' of gold the demystifying method of philology, finding under the figures of ancient gods the fundamental symbolic dimension of the solar tragedy].
46. *Igitur*, in *OC*, p. 435.
47. Ibid., p. 436.
48. Ibid., p. 435.
49. 'Mallarmé', in *Tableau*, p. 376.
50. 'The *Sun* — the Light — rises in the East [...] by the close of day man has erected a building constructed from his own inner sun; and when in the evening he contemplates this, he esteems it more highly than the original external Sun. For now he stands free in a *conscious relation* to his Spirit, and therefore a free relation. If we hold this image fast in mind, we shall find it symbolising the course of History, the great Day's work of Spirit. The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning [...] Here [in the East] rises the outward physical Sun, and in the West it sinks down: here consentaneously rises the Sun of self-consciousness, which diffuses a noble brilliance' (Hegel, *The Philosophy of History,* trans. by J Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), in the section entitled 'Classification of Historic Data', p. 103).
51. 'Mallarmé', in *Tableau*, p. 376.
52. Ibid., p. 376.
53. *D★*, p. 57 (note 52).
54. *La Dissémination*, p. 74 (note 37).
55. 'La Double Séance', in *La Dissémination*, p. 223. I am indebted to Roger Pearson's work for the homophonies.

56. The version first published in *Poésies* in 1887.
57. Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé*, p. 139.
58. 'Appropriately enough, Mallarmé produced no poems at all for about six years following the announcement of his death in his letters of 1866 and 1867. So many unproductive years suggest a grave dilemma for Mallarmé's career as a writer: what kind of poetry can a dead poet produce?' Leo Bersani, *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 25).
59. The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* gives the following definition of catastrophe: 'Événement soudain, qui, bouleverse le cours des choses, amène la destruction, la ruine, la mort' [Sudden event which overturns the course of things, leading to destruction, ruin, death]; and then: 'Il signifie aussi Dernier et principal événement d'un poème dramatique. Il se dit surtout du Dénuement funeste d'une tragédie' [It also signifies the final and most important event in a dramatic poem. It is used particularly for the gruesome end of a tragedy].
60. See the 'Préface', *Un coup de dés*, in *OC*, p. 455: 'Tout se passe, par raccourci, en hypothèse; on évite le récit'.
61. 'Bref dans un acte où l'hasard est en jeu, c'est toujours le hasard qui accompli sa propre Idée en s'affirmant ou se niant. Devant son existence la négation et l'affirmation viennent échouer. Il contient l'Absurde — l'implique, mais à l'état latent et l'empêche d'exister: ce qui permet à l'Infini d'être' [Briefly, in an act where chance is in play it is always chance which completes its own Idea by affirming or denying itself. Before its existence negation and affirmation run aground. It contains the Absurd, implying it latently but forbidding its existence — which permits the Infinite to be], *Igitur*, in *OC*, p. 441 (original text in italic).
62. *Igitur*, in *OC*, p. 442 (my emphasis). It is this irreducible ambiguity that is at the very heart of this study.
63. 'le texte renfermé', *Igitur*, in *OC*, p. 436.
64. It is not difficult here to link the image of the shipwreck to the theological crisis as it was considered above (particularly if we bear in mind the apocalyptic imagery we noted). If what has sunk below the waves is a boat, then it does not take a huge leap of imagination to envisage the destruction of the roof of a church which, resembling the upturned hull of a boat, covers the 'nef' and provides cover for the congregation. This inverted hull is always aligned along an East/West axis and is in this way coordinated with the diurnal movement of the sun. In the topography of the church, it is the celebrant who faces the solar catastrophe, his eye fixed on the horizon behind the congregation. In this way, he takes the position of the 'Maître' of the ship and is best placed to comprehend the disaster — he is the one who looks into the conflagration.
65. See 'Plainte d'automne': 'Je puis donc dire que j'ai passé de longues journées seul avec mon chat, et seul, avec un des derniers auteurs de la décadence latine; car depuis que la blanche créature n'est plus, étrangement et singulièrement j'ai aimé tout ce qui se résumait en ce mot: chute. Ainsi, dans l'année, ma saison favorite, ce sont les derniers jours alanguis de l'été, qui précèdent immédiatement l'automne et, dans la journée, l'heure où je me promène est quand le soleil se repose avant de s'évanouir, avec des rayons de cuivre jaune sur les murs gris et de cuivre rouge sur les carreaux' [I can thus say I've spent long days alone with my cat, and alone with one of the last authors of Latin decadence: for ever since the white creature went away, strangely and singularly I've been attracted to anything that could be summed up in the word 'fall'. Thus, my favourite time of year is those last, lazy days of summer which immediately precede autumn, and my favourite time of day for walks is when the sun perches for a moment on the horizon before setting, casting yellow copper rays on the grey walls and red copper rays on the window panes], in *OC*, p. 270.
66. *Hamlet*, in *OC*, p. 219.
67. Derrida, *La Dissémination*: 'Pierrot est le frère de tous les Hamlet qui hantent le texte de Mallarmé' (*D*, p. 240) [Pierrot is the brother of all the Hamlets haunting the Mallarmean text (*D*★, p. 195)]. *Mimique* was first published in *La Revue Indépendente* in 1886.
68. *Hamlet*, in *OC*, p. 302.

AFTERWORD



Into the Zone

> L'ineptie consiste à vouloir conclure. [...] c'est ne pas comprendre le crépuscule, c'est ne vouloir que midi ou minuit [...]. Oui, la bêtise consiste à vouloir conclure.
>
> [Ineptitude consists in wanting to conclude [...] it is not understanding twilight, it is wanting only noon or midnight [...]. Yes, *bêtise* consists in wanting to conclude]
>
> Gustave Flaubert[1]

After the end, where have we got to? A question that can only be approached by first asking where we have been.

This study has followed a trajectory. By way of a passage that was literally narrated in the 'Scène' of *Hérodiade*, Mallarmé led us into the heart of the night. This heart was anything but simple. In fact, we found it to be divided by an essential, irreducible ambiguity. A redoubled night where beauty died twice: death as the dialectical resolution of life where beauty returns to itself in self-consciousness, and death as the impossibility of dying where the trace of the outside disrupts this closure in its very movement. This was the double bind of the 'pur Crime'. This is what remained of the Absolute, it is what came to ruin everything.

It was this failure to conclude or failure in conclusion that opened Mallarmé's text to the readings by Blanchot and Derrida that we followed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Let us rehearse this one last time. If God is transcendent then he is limited by his opposition to the finite. He is a false infinite. Beauty is imperfect because it is relative. The poet (see *Les Fenêtres*) and the philosopher cannot tolerate this situation. The Christian intervention opens a passage, a way of overcoming this limit and realizing the true infinite in and by history. The calendars begin again, and time runs its course. This history (History) is orientated by its *telos*, the line turns back to form a circle and the end is the Absolute (the true infinite). God is brought down to earth (*terrassé*), and beauty is self-conscious: it is in-and-for-itself in the perfectly narcissistic work. The condition for this is death. But this closure is not what it seems. Precisely here, nothing nothings. Where the signifier and the signified should come together to abolish the sign, and meaning should be in absolute and direct proximity to itself, we find instead a radical displacement of signification. It is cut loose from its theological grounding.

This is what it means to have outlived beauty, and this is why we have situated Mallarmé at the end of time.

The *Aesthetics* missed this movement which we are compelled to say it

nevertheless harboured and prepared. By discounting the resolution of art in its own sphere, Hegel cannot follow through the radical consequence sheltered in his text. When he envisages a future for art after beauty, he says that it 'falls to pieces' (*Aesthetics*, 1, 608). With no spiritual task it loses all coherence (as spirit passes into the spheres of religion and philosophy). This might be one way of reading *Un coup de dés*, and it provides the impetus for a powerful interpretation of what we have come to call post-modernity. But Mallarmé's text, his extraordinary intervention, suggests a different passage. *Le Phénomène futur* projected a terrifying vision of a spiritually destitute world where the beauty of the past was received either with incomprehension, sadness, or blind imitation. Mallarmé saw this situation with the lucidity of a great poet. His response was a massive and unflinching affirmation of the tradition, an attempt to think it through to its ultimate conclusion. It is at this point, where the West (*Occident*) ends in its sunset, that Mallarmé's text enacts an opening that is only beginning to be thought. After beauty is not a simple spiritual decrepitude, but it opens into another space — the end of history is a temporal displacement from the form of presence and the opening of a more originary zone. Orientated by its *telos*, history will nevertheless have reserved/prepared something else. This, at least, is what Mallarmé gives us to believe.

Note to the Afterword

1. Gustave Flaubert, letter to Louis Bouilhet, 4 September 1850, in *Correspondance 1*. Quoted by Jacques Derrida in *Séminaire: la bête et le souverain* (Paris: Éditions de Galilée, 2008).

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In Memoriam

Martha Fernback

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